

MS Fatigue

MS fatigue can be one of the most disabling symptoms of MS. According to some studies, over 90% of people with MS experience fatigue. Fatigue can be a **primary symptom** – due to active inflammatory disease, or a **secondary symptom** – caused by other medical conditions, heat, medications, stress, depression, and sleep problems. MS fatigue can be overwhelming and for some people it can have a negative impact on work and family life, mental and physical health and, social and recreational activities.



The good news is that fatigue can often be improved by employing energy saving techniques, making lifestyle changes and certain medications. It is important to first rule out other potential causes of fatigue that are unrelated to MS such as anemia or thyroid conditions.

Fatigue as a primary symptom is thought to be the result of damage that occurs to the central nervous system (CNS). The exact cause of fatigue in MS is still unknown however it does

not appear to be related to age, gender, the length of time an individual has been living with MS or level of disability.

Fatigue as a secondary symptom is caused by other conditions or factors related to the disease such as urinary dysfunction, pain, spasticity and sleep problems. Poor diet, lack of physical activity, dehydration and certain medications can also contribute to fatigue, as outlined in the table below.

Secondary causes of fatigue	Issue and management
Sleep problems	Sleep problems are common in MS. Research suggests that people with MS are up to three times more likely to have sleep issues than the general population. Sleep problems in MS are typically caused by MS symptoms, including some of the treatments used to manage them. It is important to discuss each of your symptoms and medications with your doctor if you are experiencing troublesome sleep issues.
Poor diet	Relying on sugary foods for energy can make fatigue worse as they cause energy peaks followed by lows. Adding protein to meals or snacks, or complex carbohydrates such as wholegrain bread can help keep energy levels up.

Secondary causes of fatigue	Issue and management
Lack of physical activity	Research has shown that regular physical activity can reduce fatigue and increase strength and energy levels. Before you start a new fitness program, talk to your doctor or physiotherapist first. <i>The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults</i> with MS may be useful to set up a fitness program.
Dehydration	Dehydration can cause fatigue. Try drinking six to eight cups (about 1.5 litres) of fluids per day. Drinks that contain caffeine can have a pick me-up effect initially, but too much caffeine can dehydrate you.
Medications	Side-effects of certain medications used to treat MS can contribute to fatigue.
MS symptoms	Urinary frequency at night, stress, depression and pain can impact a restful night's sleep. It is important to address symptoms that keep you up at night with your doctor right away to try and identify the most effective way to manage them with the least impact on your sleep.

Once the potential contributing factors have been identified and dealt with, energy conservation becomes a key role in managing fatigue.

Energy conservation is a way to accomplish necessary tasks in the most efficient way. An occupational therapist can be helpful with this although some examples may include:

- Prioritize your daily or weekly tasks. Only do those that are necessary and postpone those that are not.
- Pace yourself and take frequent breaks when you are completing a task.

- Take advantage of the time of day when you feel most energized to complete necessary tasks or physical activity. Many people find the morning best.
- Stick to a regular sleep schedule. Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day will help regulate your internal clock and stabilize your energy levels.
- Arrange your home and work surroundings so things that you need are convenient and close by.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help!

Workplace accommodations for fatigue

Coping with fatigue in the workplace can be a challenge for many people. There may be some accommodations you can make to your work environment that will help manage fatigue. Some of the accommodations listed below will depend on your job and whether you have disclosed your diagnosis to your employer or not. Some accommodation examples at the workplace include:

- the ability to work from home;
- maintaining flexible work hours;
- job sharing;
- relocating your work space so that it is closer to the exit or washroom;
- bringing a small fan for your desk to keep cool;
- locating a quiet place where you can rest if you need to;
- exploring adapted office equipment that may use less of your energy.

Medication Options:

In addition to lifestyle changes and energy conservation techniques there are also medications that may help with varying degrees of success. It is important to note that some side-effects of the medications used to treat daytime fatigue may cause nighttime sleep issues.

► Modafinil (Alertec®)

Modafinil is a medication used to treat daytime sleepiness in people with narcolepsy. In clinical studies, modafinil was shown to significantly reduce fatigue in people with MS.

Common side effects: Headache, insomnia.

► Amantadine (Symmetrel™)

Amantadine is an antiviral medication used to treat influenza type A. It is believed that amantadine alters the body's dopamine levels, resulting in reduced fatigue in people with MS.

Common side effects: Insomnia, vivid dreams.

► Methylphenidate (Ritalin®)

Methylphenidate is a medication typically used to manage Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) in children. Methylphenidate stimulates the central nervous system.

Common side effects: Nervousness, insomnia, dizziness, potential liver problems.

Antidepressants may also be prescribed to treat fatigue. Often anxiety and depression can lead to feelings of fatigue and similarly, fatigue can cause people to have low mood or feelings of depression. Treatment with an antidepressant may help manage both depression and fatigue. Depression should never be ignored and is very treatable with medication, with or without counseling.

Fatigue is one of the most frequent symptoms of MS and can fluctuate on a day-to-day basis. Initially, managing fatigue may seem challenging as it typically requires a multi-dimensional approach and several interventions to maximize energy levels. An occupational therapist will be especially helpful with energy-conservation strategies. Where possible, non-medicinal techniques should be employed first as side-effects of some of the medications used to treat daytime fatigue can cause nighttime sleep issues.

Related resources

The following resources can be found online at mssociety.ca

Managing Pain and Sleep Issues in MS

Some Guidelines on Saving Energy for People with MS

Healthy Eating

Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults with MS

References:

Groetzinger, D. (2012) *Multiple Sclerosis: Its Effects on You and Those You Love*. (MS Society of Canada)

Krupp, L.B. (2001). *Living Well with MS: Managing Fatigue*. (MS Society of Canada)

O'Connor, P. (2009). *Multiple Sclerosis: The Facts You Need*. Toronto: Key Porter Books

North American Education Program. (2012). *Managing Pain and Sleep Disorders in MS*. (National MS Society, USA and the MS Society of Canada)

How to reach us

Call toll-free in Canada: **1.800.268.7582**
MS Society of Canada Web: mssociety.ca
Email: info@mssociety.ca