

30 DAYS TO **Boost Your Energy**

Is it **low energy** or is it **fatigue**?

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When does tiredness become a cause for concern? Here are the signs to look out for...

Low energy or fatigue?

Many of us struggle with low energy levels, and the cause isn't always obvious. Often tiredness is down to a lack of sleep, poor diet or being under too much stress, but in some cases, tiredness can be the sign of an underlying medical problem. How can you tell the difference between being low on energy and fatigue that's caused by a medical condition? Let's explore the differences between the two – and when your symptoms may warrant a trip to the doctor.

Is it tiredness or fatigue?

There's a lot of overlap between tiredness and fatigue, and both are quite subjective, but fatigue tends to be more severe. Fatigue can be defined as significant mental and physical exhaustion, which is different from feeling tired or lacking motivation. Some people describe it as a whole-body feeling that lingers on and is constant.

Tiredness tends to be down to a lack of sleep or having a really busy day that zaps your energy. It's more of a temporary feeling and you may be able to push through it. Despite the two being similar, there are tell-tale signs that you're experiencing fatigue rather than tiredness or low energy.

Your tiredness isn't relieved by sleep

If you're tired, napping or having a few good nights of sleep is usually enough to boost your energy levels and make you feel better. Your tiredness may come back if you don't get enough sleep or fix the cause of your poor sleep, but it should improve at least temporarily.

Fatigue, however, tends to stick around even after you've gotten plenty of sleep and taken it easy for the day. It's an ongoing feeling that isn't improved with sleep or rest.

You're tired all the time, and you can't explain why

It's usually easier to pinpoint the reason for tiredness than for fatigue. Whether you've got a young family that's disrupting your sleep, job stress is keeping you up at night, or you've been working too hard in the garden and are physically tired, tiredness tends to have an explanation.

With fatigue, your exhaustion may not have a cause that's clear to you. It hangs around, making you feel out of sorts even when you haven't been

particularly busy or up too late. This may mean your fatigue is caused by something that's going on in your body, like anaemia, hormonal changes, or an infection.

You've noticed other symptoms

Fatigue isn't always caused by an illness or disease, but if it is, you may notice some extra symptoms, such as:

- Heart palpitations
- Shortness of breath
- Extreme thirst
- Weight loss
- Snoring/choking and waking up at night
- Anxiety
- Low mood
- Muscle weakness
- Problems with your memory and concentration

If you realise that your lack of energy comes with other symptoms, it's a good idea to get things checked out by a doctor to see if they're related.

Common causes of fatigue

Sometimes there's one clear cause of fatigue, but more often a combination of factors contributes. Let's break down some of the most common.

Lifestyle factors

Your lifestyle has a massive impact on your energy levels – and not always in

the most obvious way. Drinking too much alcohol or taking recreational drugs can cause fatigue, as they disrupt your sleep. Alcohol may allow you to relax in the evenings and help you to fall asleep, but it affects the quality of your sleep. If you're drinking regularly, your body may struggle to get enough good-quality sleep, which can lead to fatigue.

An unhealthy or unbalanced diet that includes too many ultra processed foods can be another cause of fatigue. A poor diet may not provide your body with all the nutrients and fuel it needs to function properly. In some cases, this can even lead to nutritional deficiencies – another cause of fatigue.

Although most people realise over-exercising can make you tired, not exercising at all can also affect energy levels and lead to fatigue.

Life events, having a young family, and over-working or working night shifts are all more factors that can impact energy levels long-term.

Physical health problems

Whether you know you have a health problem or not, what's going on inside your body could well be causing your fatigue.

Sleep apnoea is a common cause of fatigue and tiredness, affecting >



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up to 3.9 million people in the UK. With sleep apnoea, your breathing stops and starts during the night, affecting your sleep. Although not everyone notices any symptoms, it's common to wake up a lot at night, snore, and to make snorting or choking noises during the night.

Another common source of fatigue is iron deficiency anaemia, which is caused by a lack of iron in your diet or low iron due to blood loss. As well as tiredness, anaemia can cause shortness of breath, palpitations, headaches, and skin paleness.

Anaemia can also be caused by pregnancy or health conditions that lead to bleeding, like stomach ulcers, bowel inflammation, or (rarely) cancer.

Hormonal issues like thyroid problems or diabetes are also a cause of fatigue. An over-active thyroid (hyperthyroidism) can trigger symptoms like hyperactivity, nervousness, anxiety, irritability and muscle weakness alongside the tiredness, while an under-active thyroid (hypothyroidism) causes weight gain, constipation, and coldness with fatigue.

Diabetes (a lack of insulin/insulin sensitivity) often leads to intense thirst, peeing more often, losing weight, and, of course, fatigue.

There are plenty of other health conditions that can be responsible for fatigue – everything from infections to heart failure to cancer. A doctor can provide more information on what could be causing your fatigue.

Mental health problems

Although there can be a physical trigger for fatigue, sometimes the cause is psychological. Anxiety, depression, stress and loss can all lead to excessive tiredness and low energy, which can continue for a prolonged period.

If a mental health condition is the cause of your fatigue, it's likely to come with other psychological symptoms, like irritability, lack of motivation, and low mood.

When to seek medical advice

If there's not an obvious cause of your fatigue, you've been feeling fatigued for a few weeks despite getting enough sleep, or you're experiencing other symptoms like weight loss or mood changes, it's probably time to visit your GP. They'll be able to review your symptoms, run some tests, and get to the bottom of what's going on. ■

TOP TIPS

6 ways to manage fatigue

1 GET MOVING REGULARLY

When you're tired, it's easy to shy away from exercise, but even a small amount of regular exercise can boost your energy levels.



2 FOCUS ON GETTING QUALITY SLEEP

Many people aren't getting enough sleep, or the sleep they are getting is poor quality. Aim for 6-9 hours a night and try to cut out habits that disrupt your sleep quality. Make your bedroom dark, cool, and comfortable, and aim to go to sleep at the same time every night.



3 CUT DOWN ON ALCOHOL AND CAFFEINE

Caffeine makes you feel more awake, but it may disrupt your sleep, while alcohol helps you relax, but can also impact sleep quality. Try to cut down on both to support good quality sleep.

4 EAT HEALTHILY AND OFTEN

To fuel your body and maintain your energy levels, your diet needs to include a balance of nutrients with a focus on whole foods rather than ultra-processed options. Snacking regularly on healthy foods while eating smaller meals can also help stabilise your energy levels.



5 REDUCE YOUR STRESS

Although you can't always avoid stress, you can find healthy ways to manage it and relax, which will help your energy levels.



6 SEEK HELP FROM YOUR GP

If you've tried to manage your fatigue by changing your lifestyle and routine, but things aren't getting better, or you're worried about other symptoms, it's best to seek help from a professional.