

- Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS)

Feeling tired all the time?

YOUR SYMPTOMS MIGHT GIVE YOU AN IDEA OF WHAT'S CAUSING YOUR FATIGUE, SAYS CAMILLA FOSTER

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IT'S easy to blame fatigue on busy schedules, late nights or work-related stress, but when tiredness lingers and begins to interfere with everyday life, it may be your body signalling that something isn't quite right.

Here is some GP-backed advice on how to tell the difference between ordinary tiredness and chronic fatigue, and some of the most common underlying causes of persistent tiredness.

Is fatigue common?

"Fatigue is an extremely common symptom seen in general practice," says Dr Angela Rai, GP at The London General Practice. "Feeling tired is a normal part of life, but it can also be a symptom of illness. There are numerous causes of tiredness including poor sleep, dehydration and stress, as well as medical causes.

"The symptoms of 'tired all the time' [TATT] can be difficult to manage. However, seeing your doctor can help rule out more serious conditions."

How can we distinguish normal tiredness from chronic fatigue?

"Chronic fatigue is a term usually used for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, otherwise known as Myalgic Encephalomyelitis," says Dr Rai. "Symptoms include feeling tired all the time."

With Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, [ME] symptoms are present for longer and are associated with other indicators including insomnia, problems with thinking, concentration and memory. Dr Rai adds: "There may also be flu-like symptoms, fever, headaches and aching joints or muscles. It can be a difficult to diagnose, so expert opinion should be sought for guidance and management."

How can you find out the cause?

"It's essential to have necessary investigations," says Dr Rai. "A simple blood test can identify most causes."

What are common causes of fatigue?

Anaemia: "One of the most common reasons for feeling constantly run down is iron deficiency anaemia," says Dr Rai. "Women with heavy periods are prone to anaemia, and this can be easily confirmed on a blood test and treated with iron tablets. Severe cases can be treated with an iron infusion."

Stress: "If there are no obvious physical causes, then it may be a psychological issue such as stress," says Dr Rai. "Stress causes high levels of cortisol and, in turn, this affects sleep quality causing insomnia and unrefreshed sleep."

Hypothyroidism: “An underactive thyroid is when the thyroid gland does not produce enough thyroid hormone [thyroxine] and this slows down metabolism, leading to tiredness, weight gain, increased sensitivity to cold, constipation and many other symptoms,” says Dr Rai. “A blood test can diagnose an underactive thyroid.”

Diabetes: “[This] is a metabolic disorder where there is a high level of sugar in the blood for prolonged periods of time. This can lead to tiredness, excessive thirst and frequent urination,” explains Dr Rai. “There is a risk of complications with diabetes, especially if left untreated, such as cardiovascular disease and kidney disease.”

Glandular fever:

This common viral condition usually affects teens and young adults.

“Symptoms include fever, sore throat and swollen glands. A blood test for Epstein-Barr virus can be performed to diagnose glandular fever,” says Dr Rai. “Most people recover in two to three weeks, but the tiredness symptoms may linger for several weeks or months.”

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA):

“A noticeable sign of OSA is snoring, awakening abruptly gasping or choking, observed episodes of breathing cessation during sleep and daytime sleepiness,” says Dr Rai.

“There are psychologists who can help with sleep disorders and use sleep therapy to help improve sleep levels and quality of sleep.”

Vitamin B12 and folate deficiency:

“These vitamins help perform important functions in the body including keeping the nervous system healthy,” says Dr Rai. “Deficiency can lead to symptoms such as extreme tiredness, sore tongue, mouth ulcers and pins and needles. It’s important for these deficiencies to be diagnosed and treated as soon as possible.” **Depression and anxiety:** “Mood disorders can make you feel sad and anxious as well as disrupting sleep, causing difficulty in falling asleep and early-morning waking,” says Dr Rai. “Feeling drained of energy and tiredness are common symptoms of anxiety and depression. If mood conditions such as these are diagnosed, this should be managed and therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy [CBT] may be useful.”