Diagnosing and Treating MS Fatigue

Fatigue – one of the most common symptoms of MS – occurs in more than 8 out of 10 people. It can significantly interfere with a person’s ability to function and is one of the primary causes of early departure from the workforce.

Several Factors Contribute to Fatigue in People with MS

- **Over exertion.** Like everyone else, people with MS who push themselves too hard or too fast become fatigued.
- **Disrupted sleep.** Sleep may be disrupted by trips to the bathroom, pain, spasms caused by spasticity, periodic limb movements, or sleep apnea.
- **Depression.** A difficulty falling or staying asleep is common in people who are depressed and depression is one of the most common symptoms of MS.
- **Deconditioning.** When people with MS become less active, their bodies become deconditioned or “out of shape.” With deconditioning, even limited activity can be tiring.
- **Medication side effects.** Many medications produce fatigue or sleepiness.
- **Temperature sensitivity.** Many people with MS are sensitive to heat and humidity. Becoming overheated can make people feel tired and weak.
- **Poor nutrition.** An unhealthy diet that is high in sugar may produce feelings of fatigue.

In addition, the MS disease process causes changes that produce unique kinds of fatigue:

- **Lassitude.** This type of fatigue – often referred to as ‘MS fatigue’ – is characterized by an overwhelming exhaustion that prevents participation in physical and/or cognitive activities. MS fatigue:
  - Occurs on a daily basis, worsening as the day progresses
  - Comes on easily and suddenly and tends to be worsened by heat/humidity
  - Is unrelated to activity or sleep
  - Is thought to be caused by biochemical changes in the CNS
• **Impaired nerve conduction.** Nerves that are damaged by MS do not conduct impulses efficiently. When muscles do not receive adequate nerve impulses, they tire easily, causing a person’s limbs to feel weak. Often with this type of fatigue, the legs feel stiff and heavy with extended standing or walking.

**Fatigue Management**

The first step in managing fatigue is to identify all the factors that may be contributing to it. Sometimes, addressing those factors is enough to reduce the fatigue to a manageable level. This includes:

- Medical evaluation for possible non-MS causes of fatigue such as anemia, infection, thyroid problems, sleep apnea, depression, or other possible illnesses and conditions.
- Review of all medications with your healthcare provider to identify any that may be contributing to feelings of sleepiness or fatigue.

If fatigue continues to be a problem, management options may include:

- Occupational therapy: strategies to simplify tasks at work and home
- Physical therapy: exercise program to improve overall conditioning; energy-saving ways of staying mobile
- Sleep regulation: treating MS symptoms or other conditions that interfere with sleep
- Psychological interventions: stress management, relaxation training, membership in a support group, or psychotherapy
- Cooling strategies
- Medications to help with sleepiness or mental fatigue - amantadine hydrochloride (Symmetrel®) and modafinil (Provigil®) are the most commonly prescribed

This information is made possible through a collaboration between the VA MS Centers of Excellence and the National MS Society, [www.nationalmssociety.org](http://www.nationalmssociety.org)