

# Solve your energy crisis

A guide to finding -and fixing-the cause of your fatigue

National survey results suggest that "utterly exhausted" may be America's new normal. In one survey, 37 percent of working adults admitted they'd felt fatigued in the previous two weeks. A report by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 16 percent of women and 12 percent of men ages 45 to 64 described themselves as wiped out in the prior three months. That's worrisome, because letting fatigue drag on can mess with your mood (and may even boost your risk for depression), as well as with your health, weight, work performance, and sex life.

But there's no need to live in a dog-tired state. "When you find and fix the real cause of your fatigue, you can recover your energy and feel great again," says Martin Surks, M.D., program director of the Endocrinology Division at Montefiore and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Assuming you're logging 7 to 9 hours of sleep time (and if you aren't, that's what you need to address first), follow these steps, in order, to help you get to the root of your weariness.

**Step 1 Improve your sleep hygiene.** Sometimes it's not lack of sleep that causes fatigue, it's the lack of refreshing, high-quality slumber. You want to spend the optimal amount of time in deep, restorative sleep and minimize fragmented sleep. (There are several phone apps, such as SleepCycle, that can track sleep quality. The activity monitor Fitbit One does, too.) "Whenever someone is experiencing fatigue on a regular basis, they should look at their sleeping habits," says Babak Mokhlesi, M.D., director of the Sleep Disorders Center at the University of Chicago. For example, many people believe that a nightcap before bed will help them sleep soundly, but alcohol can cause disrupted sleep. Snoring bedmates, letting pets sleep with you, and bright lights could be causing you to toss and turn at night without your realizing it.

**Step 2 Consult your doctor.** If you still feel pooped during the day after two weeks of sleep upgrades, it's time for a visit to your doctor. Fatigue is a symptom (not a condition) of many treatable health problems. "See your primary physician rather than a sleep specialist," Surks says. "He or she can ask questions that will help pinpoint the cause and run tests to rule out a wide range of conditions like depression, diabetes, or hypothyroidism [underactive thyroid]."

**Step 3 Review your meds.** Bring a list of the drugs you take to your appointment or simply toss the pill bottles into a bag (a drug review with your doctor is a smart thing to do every six to 12 months anyway). From antidepressants to blood pressure drugs to cholesterol-lowering statins, many common prescription medications can leave you dragging through the day. Drugs can cause fatigue in many ways, including depressing the central nervous system, lowering heart rate, or reducing the body's stores of nutrients, such as magnesium or potassium. If it turns out that you take a potentially energy-draining drug, ask about alternatives.

**Step 4 Move a little more.** We know: "Get up and exercise" is the last thing you want to hear when you're beat. But believe us, it's worth a try. Exercise seems to create energy and alleviate

fatigue by reducing stress, helping you sleep, and increasing circulation so that your muscles receive more oxygen and nutrients. And you don't have to train for a marathon to see the effects. In a small University of Georgia study, chronically tired couch potatoes embarked on a low- or moderate-intensity exercise routine three times per week for six weeks while a control group didn't exercise. The low-intensity group got the best results: a 65 percent drop in fatigue. The moderate-intensity group improved too, but less so. The researchers think that's because some of those people may have been working out too hard for their fitness level. Even easier exercise may have a benefit. When researchers at New York City's Hospital for Special Surgery put seniors on a gentle yoga or chair-based exercise routine, 39 percent reported an increase in energy after eight weeks. Research suggests that specially designed routines can ease tiredness for cancer survivors, people with chronic fatigue syndrome, and heart-attack survivors.

**Step 5 Clean up your diet.** Stay fueled with regular meals and healthy snacks that are low in fat and packed with fiber (beans, fruit, whole grains, and vegetables). According to a recent Pennsylvania State University study, the more fat people eat at a meal, the sleepier they become afterward. Researchers from Australia and the U.K found that people felt more alert in the morning after having a breakfast high in fiber and carbohydrates than they did when they had a high-fat or a high-carb, low-fiber meal. Beware of very high-protein diets; some evidence suggests that they can increase fatigue.

**Step 6 Reorganize your day.** Still having trouble after taking steps 1 through 5? You may think you're tired when you're actually tense. One in three people who say they're stressed attribute their fatigue to their mood, according to a survey from the American Psychological Association. "Stress feels like fatigue-you're not in control of your life, it takes longer to do things, and you may have trouble multitasking. It can also interfere with sleep and healthy eating, and leave you without enough time to recharge or relax," says sleep and fatigue researcher David Dinges, Ph.D., professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Adding "learn a stress-reduction technique" to your already-crazy to-do list isn't the answer. "Stop and think about what's important to you," Dinges recommends. Saying "no" more often to obligations and activities that aren't high priority gives you more time for the things you enjoy. Those are the ones that will rejuvenate you, he says.

Another tip: Spend some time each day away from your computer, tablet, or smartphone. "When you feel as if you always have to respond, always have to be in touch, it's hard to relax," he says. "I try to set aside part of the day when I get away from all the electronic noises."

If you absolutely need a quick boost of energy here are some of the best options to drink.

**WATER** This should be your first choice. t. Being dehydrated, even mildly, may lead to fatigue, lack of energy, loss of concentration, and irritability, studies show.

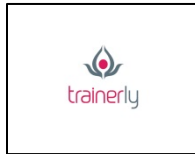
**TEA** It has-enough caffeine to perk you up but not enough to cause the jitters. Green tea has 24 to 40 milligrams per eight-ounce cup. Black tea has 14 to 61 milligrams.

**COFFEE** A cup has 95 to 200 milligrams; most adults should have no more than 400 milligrams per day. It takes almost 6 hours for half of the caffeine you consume to be metabolized by your body, so having it too late in the day can disrupt sleep.

**ENERGY DRINKS** Energy drink labels don't always list the caffeine count but they can have more than double the amount in coffee. Some may contain undesirable ingredients such as sugar. If you're looking for a pick-me-up, you're better off with a cup of tea or coffee.

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