



# Fatigue and Brain Injury

**This handout describes how brain injury may affect fatigue. A list of resources is included.**

## What is fatigue?

“Fatigue” is an overwhelming lack of energy. Fatigue can be mental or physical tiredness. It can make it hard to do even basic activities in your life. You may also feel like you cannot think clearly.

Fatigue may change the way you do things or limit the things you can do each day. Fatigue usually improves as a person heals from a brain injury, but often does not completely go away.

## Why does a brain injury affect fatigue?

You may have fatigue because your brain is working harder than it did before your injury. You may also be recovering from related problems, which can also take energy to heal. Your brain is trying to heal itself and do its best to help you function. It needs more energy than usual.

Brain injury can also disrupt sleep. If you often felt tired before your injury, you are at a higher risk for having fatigue problems after your injury.

## What happens when you have fatigue?

When you get fatigued, it may be because you have done more than your mind or body can manage. Sometimes fatigue happens for no obvious reason. When you are fatigued, you may feel exhausted without much warning, and you may not have the energy to do even a small task that you can usually do well.

### **What makes fatigue worse?**

- Doing too many things.
- Not taking breaks during the day.
- Stress or illness.
- Chronic pain.
- Too little exercise.
- Poor nutrition, such as eating junk food.
- Feeling depressed or anxious.
- Poor sleep.

### **When should I ask for help with my fatigue?**

Talk with your health care provider if:

- You are too tired to get out of bed during the day.
- Your fatigue is getting worse.
- You have cut back on doing things you love to do.
- You are not sleeping well at night.
- Your fatigue seems to be related to your emotions or pain.
- Your thinking is often affected by fatigue.
- You are having trouble taking care of yourself or your family.

### **What can I do about fatigue?**

*Take care of yourself:*

- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a well-balanced diet.
- Avoid alcohol and too much caffeine, especially at night.
- Get a full night's sleep. Wake up at the same time every day.
- Avoid napping if possible, or take one brief nap per day for less than an hour.
- Take your medicines as prescribed.
- Limit the amount of stress in your life.
- Do relaxing activities during the day.
- Make sure you do at least one enjoyable activity each day.

***Save your energy:***

- Be realistic about how much you can do in a day.
- Build your stamina slowly, and be patient with yourself.
- Take small breaks throughout the day instead of trying to do as much as you can and then “crashing” for the rest of the day.
- Alternate hard tasks with easy tasks.
- Do not do tasks that do not need to be done.
- Plan ahead and organize your work.
- Sit during tasks (such as cooking), when possible.
- Use lightweight or electric utensils and tools. Let gravity help you do the work.
- When possible, ask friends or family to help you do things that use the most energy.

***Set priorities:***

- Prioritize things you want to do in the day, so you have the energy for the most important things.
- Do activities that make you tired at the times of day when you have the most energy. Many people find the morning is the best time to do big tasks.

***Pace yourself:***

Do a little bit at a time. Break down tasks and do each part separately, with rest periods in between. For example, instead of vacuuming the whole house at one time, take a break between vacuuming each room.

**Where can I learn more about fatigue?**

***Ask a professional:***

- Your doctor or health care provider.
- Your psychologist.
- An occupational therapist, physical therapist, or a speech and language pathologist. They can give you ideas on ways to pace yourself and save your energy.

***Check out these resources:***

**Brain Injury Association of America**

[www.biausa.org/](http://www.biausa.org/)

8201 Greensboro Drive, Suite 611, McLean, VA 22102

703-761-0750

Brain Injury Information Hotline: 800-444-6443

06-598-4295

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

Rehabilitation Medicine:  
206-598-4295

University of Washington  
Traumatic Brain Injury  
Model System:  
[www.tbi.washington.edu](http://www.tbi.washington.edu)

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UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
**MEDICAL CENTER**  
UW Medicine

**HARBORVIEW**  
MEDICAL  
CENTER   
UW Medicine

**Rehabilitation Medicine**

Box 356167

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195  
206-598-4295

**Brain Injury Association of Washington**

[www.biawa.org/](http://www.biawa.org/)

3516 S. 47th Street, Suite 100, Tacoma, WA 98409

253-238-6085

Helpline: 800-523-5438

E-mail: [info@biawa.org](mailto:info@biawa.org)

**Multiple Sclerosis Association of America**

[www.msaa.com](http://www.msaa.com)

706 Haddonfield Road, Cherry Hill, NJ 08002

856-488-4500

**National Brain Tumor Foundation**

[www.braintumor.org](http://www.braintumor.org)

22 Battery Street, Suite 612, San Francisco, CA 94111

Patient Line: 800-934-2873

E-mail: [nbtf@braintumor.org](mailto:nbtf@braintumor.org)

**National Multiple Sclerosis Society**

<http://was.nationalmssociety.org>

Greater Washington Chapter

192 Nickerson St., Suite 100

Seattle, WA 98109

800-344-4867

E-mail: [greaterWAinfo@nmsswas.org](mailto:greaterWAinfo@nmsswas.org)

**National Stroke Association**

[www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)

9707 E. Easter Lane, Englewood, CO 80112

800-STROKES (800-787-6537)

**Alzheimer's Association**

[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

225 N. Michigan Ave., Fl. 17, Chicago, IL 60601

Helpline: 800-272-3900

**National Parkinson Foundation**

[www.parkinson.org](http://www.parkinson.org)

1501 N.W. 9th Avenue, Miami, FL 33136-1494

800-327-4545

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