



# **Fatigue Information Sheet**

Fatigue can be described as a feeling of extreme tiredness, weariness or exhaustion. Fatigue is the normal way our minds or bodies tell us to take a break after doing something tiring. Fatigue is also one of the most common problems that people experience after a brain injury. Unlike general fatigue, which is temporary and can be alleviated by rest, the intense feeling of fatigue after a brain injury may be present most of the time and can have a significant impact on your quality of life. This information sheet will help you to understand fatigue, its causes and how it may affect you. It will also provide you with some useful information on how you can manage your fatigue and reduce its impact on your everyday life.

## What causes fatigue after a brain injury?

We don't fully understand all the causes of fatigue. One reason is that your brain now needs to work harder to do things like thinking, talking, taking in information and coordinating your body.

Other causes of fatigue after a brain injury include:

- The parts of the brain that were injured
- Sleeping difficulties
- Pain
- Illness or the effects of medication
- Anxiety, depression or mental health difficulties
- An over stimulating environment

## After brain injury, you may experience different types of fatigue:

**Physical fatigue:** Your body needs to work harder to do things that were previously effortless.

Muscle weakness is very common.

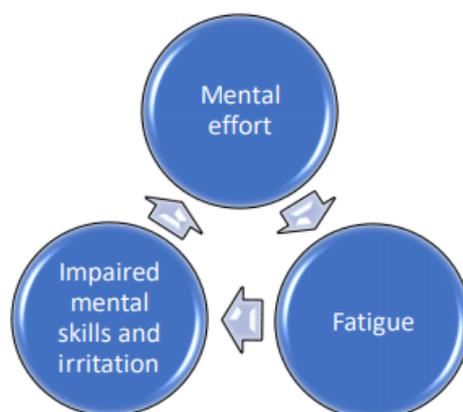
**Psychological fatigue:** This is often associated with depression and anxiety and becomes worse with increased stress.

**Mental fatigue:** This is caused by the extra effort it takes to deliberately think after your brain injury.

Previously automatic tasks now take more conscious effort to complete. Working harder to think and stay focused can make you mentally tired.

## How fatigue may affect you

Fatigue can have a negative impact on your mood, physical functioning, attention, memory, communication and tolerance levels. A cycle is often formed, in which mental effort leads to fatigue, which leads to impaired mental skills and irritation, which then leads to more fatigue.



## Fatigue can affect how you think, how you feel and what you do

Think: I cannot take in information  
I get overwhelmed in busy situations  
My brain feels like it is in a fog

Feel: Guilty  
Judged by others  
Fearful that my fatigue will not improve

Do: I am not able to return to work right now  
I slur my words when I am over tired  
I do not have enough energy to go out

## Ways of Coping with Fatigue

For some people, fatigue improves over time, however for many people fatigue is a condition that they must learn to manage in the long-term. Often there is a tendency to try to return to the same levels of activity that were achieved prior to brain injury. This often leads to a cycle of doing too much activity and then having to rest for a few days as a result. It is important that you don't push yourself beyond your limits. Try to recognize when your body is telling you that you have had enough.

**Recognise the early warning signs; do not keep pushing yourself. Don't be afraid to take a rest. If you continue to push yourself, serious fatigue will set in and you will struggle for the rest of the day if not longer.**

**Pace yourself** – Don't do one task after another and don't attempt to rush activities. Attempting to do things quickly has a particularly unsettling effect on almost all who have suffered a brain injury. Try to spread out the tasks you need to do over the week. This way you won't use up all your energy at once.

**Prioritise** – Just do the things that have to be done. Leave everything else or ask someone to help.

**Build in routine and structure** – This means planning your days so that you do not overdo it. Try to establish a regular routine, with periods of activity interspersed with periods of rest.

**Gradually and slowly build up activities** – Remember things that used to be easy might take a lot more out of you now. Start with familiar tasks at home that you can complete without fatigue, then gradually increase the complexity of each task as you improve. Doing a little and often is more effective than trying to do too much at one time.

**Recognise the signs of getting over tired** – After a brain injury, feeling over tired can come on very quickly. Some of the common signs may be forgetting words, blurred vision, getting very irritated or becoming tearful. If you notice any of these signs, stop what you are doing and have a rest.

**Regular rest breaks** – Build in regular rest periods or quiet times in the day, even if you don't lie down. This will help you keep going for longer. Try to rest before you get exhausted. If you feel tired, your brain is telling you that it needs a rest. Listen to your brain. Resting means doing as little as possible. Switch off the TV, turn your phone to silent, close the curtains, set an alarm and close your eyes if you can.



**Take a nap** – Don't feel bad about taking a nap in the middle of the day if you need it. A short nap of 20-30 minutes can help to improve mood, cognitive performance and alertness without leaving you feeling groggy or interfering with your nighttime sleep. Try not to nap too late in the day, no later than 3pm, or for any longer than 45 minutes.

**Say no, delegate and prioritise** – Say no to excessive demands of others. Be assertive, prioritise and delegate tasks.

**Tell others** – be open about your difficulty and tell people that you suffer with fatigue. Be a morning person – Do your most demanding activity in the morning when you are most alert and have the most mental energy.

**Eat regular meals** – Eating a meal can often boost energy levels. Avoid large amounts of caffeine as although alertness may temporarily increase, this only lasts a short period of time and fatigue levels will only increase once the caffeine has worn off.

**Exercise daily** – When you are feeling fatigued exercise may feel like the last thing you want to do but research has shown that people with a brain injury who exercise have better mental function and alertness. Over time, being more active helps reduce fatigue and builds stamina. It also may improve mood and sleep quality.

**Treat your fatigue like a bank account** – Your energy levels are like a bank account that you need to manage. You need to keep putting in good quality rest and not taking out too much mental activity or to spread it out. If you get overdrawn there is a nasty penalty so avoid that.

**Keep a diary** – keeping a record of the activities that you are doing and how you are feeling afterwards. This will increase your awareness of how much you are doing and what the triggers are that provoke fatigue. Try to notice what tires you out the most. It could be going on the computer, having visitors, driving or going shopping. Do these activities when you are fresh and have your most energy. Then have a rest.