

Fatigue and The College Student

INTRODUCTION

Fatigue is a subjective symptom of tiredness, weariness, or lack of energy. Fatigue may result from virtually every physical and psychological illness. Fortunately most fatigue is self-limiting and clears on its own with time.

CAUSES OF FATIGUE

Fatigue can have one or many precipitating factors. Fatigue can be related to illness or a normal response in a mentally and physically healthy individual experiencing periods of high stress.

SYMPTOMS, SIGNS, HISTORY AND LIFESTYLE CLUES

The duration of the fatigue and anything you feel would be a contributing cause is helpful for the clinician to know. The practitioner may ask you a number of questions about your recent or past history and any symptoms you maybe having. You shouldn't feel offended if some of the questions seem personal; this helps determine possible causes.

Types of questions may include history of illness, social behaviors, exercise, school /job stressors, caffeine / energy drinks , drug use, alcohol consumption, sleep habits, recent travel, major of study, credits, grades, relationships with roommates and friends, and clubs.

EVALUATION

Each student's case is different and the need for tests varies. Tests are best determined after a physical exam and history by your health care provider.

TREATMENT

Most students don't usually have an abnormality allowing us to confidently identify a physical cause of fatigue, such as mononucleosis or thyroid disorder. Normal test results are difficult for most patients to accept. Find reassurance in normal test results, as they mean your fatigue will likely get better with rest and cutting back on excessive activities. Poor and inadequate sleep, class workload, social commitments (clubs, pledging, parties, bar-hopping), ingestion of too much caffeine (and alcohol), poor diet, too much exercise (or too little!), and too many extra-curricular activities (intramurals, clubs) can be contributing to fatigue. It is unreasonable to expect your body to continue to function for an entire semester or academic year on "over-

drive" and not break down on you, physically and/or psychologically.

If an infection is identified, most cases of fatigue will clear within days or several weeks. Most infections require time, medications for comfort, and rest. Don't worry – your energy level will return! Other physical causes of fatigue may dictate referral to a specialist. Students with certain sleep disturbances may benefit from a sleep study. If a psychological cause is suspected, we have counselors and psychiatrists on staff at Cook Counseling Center for further evaluation.

To avoid fatigue associated with school the single most beneficial thing you can do is get adequate quantity and good quality sleep. Try to do the following:

- ◆ Go to bed and wake up at the same hour every day. Avoid "all-nighters", couple hours of rest, or sleep for extreme long periods either. The catch up on sleep idea , doesn't really work. Be consistent. Are you getting 6-8 hours of rest nightly, but still not feeling rested. Review possible causes for interrupted sleep.
- ◆ Use bed for sleeping and sex only – not, studying, TV or Xbox . All phones and electronic devices should be turned off one hour prior to bedtime. Scientific evidence has proven this can improve quality of rest.
- ◆ Caffeine use, more than just a cup in the morning and specifically after noon, can interrupt healthy sleep wave patterns and can result in poor quantity and quality of sleep. Avoid energy drinks.
- ◆ Limit or avoid alcohol, especially when already tired. It may help you fall asleep, but it interrupts quality of sleep.
- ◆ Nicotine (tobacco) is a stimulant - it should be avoided.
- ◆ Try to control sleep environment (cool temperature, noise and light).
- ◆ Wind down for sleep with light reading. Don't play games or have heated conversations.
- ◆ Use over-the-counter sleep medications (e.g. Tylenol PM[®], Benadryl[®], Melatonin[®]) for short-term only. Melatonin[®] if used should be taken 3 hours prior to bedtime for benefit.

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- ◆ Avoid naps, unless they are short (20-30 minutes at most).
- ◆ Remember, sleep where you sleep best, not the floor, sofa, or friends' room.
- ◆ You will may not sleep well the first night or two in a new place.
- ◆ Don't expect to come back from a road trip well rested!
- ◆ Exercise 30 minutes a day on most days of the week, but NOT within 1-2 hours of bed time.
- ◆ Attempt to get 7-9 hours of sleep a night. Very few people can do well with 5- 6 hours a night;

There may be a number of herbs supplements and teas that make claims to reduce fatigue or be an "energy formula". Most stimulating or mental sharpening effects from these herb formulas are probably derived from the addition of caffeine, but possibly from botanicals like ephedra. Ginko biloba, and even St. John's wort may be found in other formulations and can cause significant drug interactions with aspirin/ Ibuprofen and popular prescription antidepressants.

If you feel like "I am always getting sick!" remember that it is not uncommon for persons of college age to "catch" several colds a year. Poor sleep and chronic stress suppresses the immune system, adding to this number.

Finally, and perhaps the most difficult for an eager and motivated college student, is to defer or delegate commitments, and saying, "No, I'm really sorry," to getting involved when you are committed to your limit. Remember saying "No," is not a sign of weakness or laziness. It is in your best health interest to "pass" on commitments/ proposals once in a while.

Resources:

Thomas E. Cook Counseling Center
McComas Hall, Rm 240 Virginia Tech
895 Washington Street
Blacksburg VA 24061
(540)231-6557

The Student Success Center

www.studentsuccess.vt.edu

Campus Alcohol Abuse Prevention Center

135 War Memorial Gym

Blacksburg, VA 24061

www.alcohol.vt.edu

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540-231-2233

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