

Fatigue: It's a sign that something's wrong

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By Eve Glicksman

Do you wake up in the morning feeling tired? Have to push yourself through the day braced by coffee or cigarettes? Find yourself too tense to sleep and too exhausted to think straight?

If so, you may suffer from chronic fatigue, one of the most frequently heard health complaints in doctors' offices today. Among 1,159 patients surveyed in two Texas clinics, 1 in 4 identified fatigue as a major problem. In a national study of 18- to 34-year-old women, 40 percent reported feeling tired most of the time.

Many people accept fatigue as a fact of life or a condition one was born with. Some who mention their general lackluster state to the family doctor find their symptoms are not taken seriously. Tiredness, after all, is something everyone complains about in our "gotta run" times.

Yet chronic fatigue is often the first and most prevalent symptom of a wide range of diseases from diabetes to cancer to depression. Whether the weariness is caused by anemia, hormonal problems or mental overload, it is a sign that something is wrong with your life.

Dr. Edward McGehee, professor of family medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, advises anyone who feels constantly run down to get "a good, solid going over." The exam, he says, should include a discussion of your symptoms, family medical history, informa-

tion about recent viral infections and some basic blood tests.

Then the physician should examine your emotional life, he says, to see if work, family or other conflicts are contributing to your fatigue. Bad habits—cigarettes, alcohol, poor diet, lack of exercise, sleep disorders, drugs and "doing it all"—also are common sources of fatigue.

One of the most frustrating aspects of evaluating exhaustion, in fact, is that just about anything could cause it. McGehee calls chronic fatigue "one of the most baffling and perplexing complaints that a patient can present to a doctor."

"Of those who are tired all the time, the majority by far end up without any real diagnosis to explain it," McGehee says. They have no clear-cut medical abnormalities. Vitamins will not benefit them at all. More sleep won't make them peppier."

Dr. Eliot Nierman, chief of general internal medicine at Graduate Hospital, in Philadelphia, estimates that emotional and lifestyle stresses—most notably anxiety and depression—are at the root of up to 75 percent of the fatigue cases he sees. "Fatigue is not the kind of problem that can be successfully dealt with through slam-bang blood tests. The emotional causes are as real as the physical ones," he emphasizes.

Nierman's clinical observations are borne out by a study published in 1988 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

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tion. While scientists once speculated that the Epstein-Barr virus held the answer to unexplained fatigue, the latest research is confirming that emotion may play the more critical role. The AMA study found that 80 percent of patients with chronic fatigue suffered from depression and anxiety compared with 12 percent in a control group.

On this point, Nierman notes further that many people do not recognize when they're depressed. "You don't need to cry and feel sad to be depressed," he explains. "You may have appetite problems, chronic sleep problems, headaches or just a general lack of enjoyment."

Nierman is quick to add that there are any number of physical conditions that may cause fatigue. "The number of diagnoses are legion," he acknowledges. "A non-specific disease like fatigue is a challenge for doctors. They need to take a broad-based look at the patient and explore myriad directions." Fatigue, he says, can be related to allergies, iron deficiency,

caffeine excesses, viral infections, thyroid or kidney abnormalities, or medications, to name just a few possibilities.

Give yourself a break

Dr. Holly Atkinson, author of "Women and Fatigue," says a basic rule of thumb in determining whether your symptoms are due more to physical or psychological factors is to examine the pattern.

If you're more tired in the morning or during certain activities but grow more energetic as the day wears on, your tiredness is more likely due to psychological stresses. If your fatigue increases during the day and persists despite changing activities, there is a better chance that the causes are physical.

Also, psychologically induced fatigue is not usually relieved by lying down or sleeping whereas physically induced fatigue may go away with rest.

How bad should your fatigue get before you see a doctor? For each person, the symptoms are different. Some may experience muscle aches or irritability, while another will have trouble concentrating or feel dizzy. The key is to assess how your tiredness is affecting day-to-day activities. Do you miss work? Do you doze off during meetings? Have you lost interest in sex? Are you too bushed to enjoy the week-

end? Are you losing weight?

"One of the best things people can do in general is to exercise," Nierman recommends. "Lying around all the time saps energy. Exercise also is the best way to deal with chronic stress."

Atkinson advises women in particular to work on saying yes to their own needs and no to others. Set aside 90 minutes a day for yourself to read, take a bath or do handiwork. Also, she suggests, pay attention to body rhythms.

The message from doctors is that fatigue shouldn't be a way of life. Whether the solution involves changing your diet, scaling down work hours, getting professional counseling or sharing more household jobs, you should take control and manage your symptoms. While tiredness may not be life-threatening, exhaustion can make you vulnerable to a host of serious illnesses.

Above all, don't let anyone convince you that fatigue is all in your head, Atkinson urges. Insist that your doctor explore all the possible causes and offer appropriate recommendations and referrals. "Fatigue is real," she says. "Tiredness is not in your genes."

Words by Wro

Eve Glicksman is a Philadelphia writer who specializes in health and behavior issues.