



# Fatigue

► The word 'arthritis' literally means inflammation of the joints.

► People with arthritis may experience fatigue over long periods, but this is not the same as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), which is also referred to as ME.

## Getting advice

Your GP or rheumatology team will be able to advise you on managing your fatigue. They may ask you to complete a questionnaire to help measure the severity of your fatigue and to assess how it is affecting you. This will help determine the best treatment or self-help measures for you. They can also organise a review of your drug treatment.

## What is fatigue?

Fatigue is an overpowering sense of tiredness, a feeling of exhaustion, and lack of energy. It differs from the usual tiredness that we all experience at times. Fatigue may be physical, emotional or psychological – or a combination of all three.

## Arthritis and fatigue

Arthritis is a fluctuating condition, meaning that its effects can vary from day to day. Typically, there will be times when the symptoms of arthritis improve or even disappear (referred to as going into remission), and times when they worsen (known as flare-ups).

Two of the most common symptoms of arthritis are inflammation and chronic pain, which often cause fatigue. Fatigue is most likely to be experienced when you have a flare-up, when your arthritis is most active.

## What are the symptoms of fatigue?

Because the experience of fatigue is subjective, it is difficult to characterise and to evaluate, but there are a number of recognised, common symptoms.

These include:

- feelings of heaviness in the body and limbs
- feelings of exhaustion, which may be flu-like
- a significant lack of energy, or feeling 'wiped out' all the time
- an inability to focus or concentrate (also referred to as 'brain fog')
- listlessness or a lack of motivation
- feeling low, anxious or depressed

## What are the causes of fatigue?

There are many different factors that may cause fatigue but, as we have said, among the most common are inflammation and chronic pain.

### Autoimmune conditions

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune condition. It is thought this occurs when the body creates inflammation in joints when it is not actually necessary; it is fighting itself, rather than any invasive threat. It is this inflammation that causes pain and makes movement difficult.

► For more guidance on effective pain management, see our booklet: *Managing Pain*.

### Inflammatory arthritis

In any form of inflammatory arthritis, tissue in the body produces small proteins called cytokines, which induce an immune response that can lead to fatigue.

There are certain forms of arthritis that are much more likely than others to cause fatigue. Rheumatoid arthritis commonly leads to the experience of fatigue, but it also occurs in other forms, such as:

- psoriatic arthritis, which causes inflammation in and around the joints, particularly the fingers and toes, and
- ankylosing spondylitis, which affects the joints of the lower back.

### Chronic pain

The pain caused by any form of arthritis can be persistent, widespread and sometimes severe. Living with long-term or chronic pain commonly leads to fatigue.

### Other causes

There are various other factors that can cause fatigue, such as:

- anaemia, in which a lack of iron in the body causes a reduction in the number of red blood cells that carry oxygen around the body
- long-term conditions such as diabetes or thyroid disease
- weak muscles, which means you need more energy to do things
- some drugs used to treat arthritis (such as methotrexate and painkillers) may cause drowsiness or loss of concentration.

### The four 'P's

When you feel fatigued, try not to use up your energy on unimportant things. Instead, conserve your energy for things that matter to you. Here are a few tips:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Problem solving</b><br/>Take time to consider what tasks or activities tire you most and then change your pattern of behaviour to focus more on those activities that you find easy or that bring you pleasure.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Prioritising</b><br/>Put the tasks you need to do in order of importance, and decide if you can remove or ignore any tasks, or delegate them (hand them over to someone else).</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Planning</b><br/>Prepare in advance for things you have to do.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Pacing</b><br/>When you know what tasks you must achieve, try to break them down into manageable parts and spread them throughout the day or week.</li></ul> |
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## A good night's sleep

Sleep helps restore our energy and can improve our ability to manage pain and keep fatigue at bay. It lets the body restore itself so it can function at its best. It is thought that, while we sleep, the brain replaces chemicals, solves problems and sorts information. Sleep also enables our joints to rest.

Try to improve your sleeping patterns by establishing a regular night-time routine, having a warm bath before bed, or reading for half an hour before going to sleep.

It is also important to avoid any stimulants, such as caffeine, alcohol or cigarettes. Certain exercises can also aid sleep.



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► See our booklet: *Exercise and Arthritis*.

► See our booklet: *Healthy Eating and Arthritis*.

## How to manage fatigue

Managing the pain of arthritis is a challenge for anyone, but there is a lot of help available. The first thing to do is to acknowledge that you are feeling fatigued; admitting that you are in pain and that you feel fatigued is not a sign of weakness, or any indication that you're not coping.

Ask your GP or rheumatology team/specialist to review your drug treatment, which may make a significant difference to your energy levels. There are also a few things you can do yourself to minimise the risk of fatigue:

- Know your limits. By setting yourself manageable goals, you won't become exhausted.
- Use your joints well. You may find that your arthritis makes it difficult for you to carry out some everyday tasks, and that you're easily tired or exhausted. But it is possible to help reduce the stress on your joints by finding new and different ways of doing things, including learning to use equipment such as walking aids.
- Prepare in advance by, for example, keeping a stock of healthy meals in the freezer for those days when energy is low and you don't want to cook a meal from scratch.
- Don't be afraid to ask your friends or family for extra support to help you through periods of fatigue.
- Learn to say no to requests from others who invite you to do things you don't really want to do.
- Be aware of your energy levels, and try to anticipate or manage any stress or anxiety by using relaxation techniques or mindfulness training, gentle exercise such as tai chi, or having a massage.
- Be aware of which activities make you feel exhausted and keep some energy for those things that are important to you, as this will help you feel more positive and give you a sense of achievement.

## Exercise

When you are in pain or fatigued, you may feel that exercise is the last thing on your mind, but there is evidence to suggest that exercising increases your energy levels and helps you feel better about yourself and better able to manage your condition.

There are many different forms of exercise and it is possible for everyone to find one they can do. The golden rule is that the more you do, the more you will find yourself able to do. Gradually, as your fatigue reduces, increase the exercise you do daily, which will increase your energy.

Don't be afraid to ask for advice from your GP or from a personal trainer. And be careful about the way you exercise, choosing an exercise routine to suit you and your lifestyle. Keeping it up helps guarantee success.

## Diet

Research is still being carried out into a possible link between diet and arthritis, but it is increasingly thought that certain foods can play a part in reducing pain and inflammation, and helping to slow the progression of arthritis.



## ARTHRITIS CARE

### How Arthritis Care can help you

Want to talk to someone about your arthritis?  
Or read more about the condition?

Call our free, confidential Helpline on 0808 800 4050 for information and support. We're open weekdays from 09:30 to 17:00 – we'd really like to hear from you.

We have over 40 free booklets and factsheets on various aspects of arthritis, from diet and surgery, to managing pain and fatigue. These can be sent to you in the post – just ask our Helpline staff for details.

### Go online

You can download all our booklets and factsheets as PDFs from [arthritiscare.org.uk/information](http://arthritiscare.org.uk/information)

We also have an Online Community, where you can chat to others with arthritis, and can be reached at [arthritiscareforum.org.uk](http://arthritiscareforum.org.uk)



Arthritis Care and Arthritis Research UK have joined together to help more people live well with arthritis. Read how at [arthritiscare.org.uk/merger](http://arthritiscare.org.uk/merger). All donations will now go to Arthritis Research UK and be used to help people with arthritis live full and active lives in communities across England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

## Thank you

### Contact us

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Please check our website for up-to-date information and reference sources or call 020 7380 6577.



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