

INFOSHEET



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Concussion aftercare: Fatigue

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is extreme tiredness. Fatigue can be physical or mental and is normal after physical or mental activity. It is a signal telling us to take a break. 'Normal' fatigue is time-limited and eased with rest. 'Pathological' fatigue, on the other hand, is experienced following a brain injury and may last longer and may not improve with rest. Pathological fatigue can significantly impact on your ability to do the activities you want to do.

After a concussion, you may experience the following symptoms:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Nausea and sickness
- High levels of fatigue

For many people, these symptoms will decrease within a few days or weeks. Over a period of a few weeks, most people recover and are able to return to normal activity.

Ongoing symptoms

Some people however, experience persistent (ongoing) symptoms over a longer period of time. These include:

- Mental fatigue
- Problems concentrating
- Sensitivity to light and noise
- Headache and dizziness

Your level of fatigue may vary and you may feel more tired as the day goes on. If you have persistent symptoms, it may take you longer to regain your mental energy.

Simple mental activities that would normally be relaxing can be very demanding for a person who has had a concussion. Watching TV, reading a book or having a conversation can be very tiring. This is because the brain gets easily tired when registering every detail after a concussion.

Following a concussion, simple physical activities such as walking and playing can also result in fatigue. This is known as intolerance to exercise. This physical fatigue or exercise intolerance can be managed with a gradual and progressive exercise program, much like a top athlete retraining. For most people, physical fatigue tends to go away within a few days or weeks following a concussion injury. You can then return to physical activity and exercise.

What is surprising and often frustrating for many people with a concussion, is the mental fatigue. For example, you could spend all day playing and not feel tired from it, but an hour of homework can leave you exhausted. In some people, this mental fatigue can last for long periods of time. It is like owning a car that you can only fill with half a tank of gas. You can now only go half as far as you used to. When you run out of gas, the engine just stops. With mental fatigue, it is as if the brain runs out of chemicals and needs to stop.

What can I do?

Most people tend to get fatigued in the afternoon, generally around 2:00pm or 3:00pm. One suggestion would be to do the things that may be more difficult, earlier in the day when your mind is clearer. Keep in mind that fatigue can also affect your memory. If you learn information when you are fresh, it is more likely to stay with you. If you stay up late studying for a big exam, you will have more problems recalling the information the next day than if you had studied in the morning.

Exercise improves your ability to think. Although the human brain weighs less than 5% of the entire body, it uses 30% of the oxygen in the body. The same is true of glucose which provides the energy that runs your body. If we use the car analogy again, full power is not possible when an air filter is clogged and the carburetor has gunk. When you exercise, more oxygen gets into your blood stream and helps your ability to think. If your doctor has cleared you to do exercise, you should make a conscious effort to do so.

People who have chronic pain syndromes benefit from certain types of exercises. For example, swimming is very good for people who have neck or back pain. Therefore, always talk with your doctor about what exercise will work best for you.

A good diet or nutrition is also important. This should come from eating 3 good nutritious meals a day. In our busy society, people tend to eat a doughnut, have some coffee and rush off to school or work. This is not a very good diet. The sugar from a doughnut or the caffeine from coffee can give you a brief burst of energy (or the sugar buzz), but that energy does not last. The problem with sugar is that you are on a "roller coaster" where you get a burst of energy but then you come crashing down. Therefore, the trick to keeping the energy consistent is to have a constant supply of energy to the brain through regular nutritious meals and snacks. These release energy slowly rather than in a burst.

You will also need to gradually increase your stamina. Going from not studying or working to full time activity is very stressful. For someone with head-injury, this is nearly impossible. Therefore, you will need to give the brain the time it needs to build a tolerance to fatigue. A common approach is to have people slowly return to activity. You might start with part-time hours of 1 to 3 hours per day of school or work. Gradually increasing the hours, only when you can tolerate it. There are high expectations of you, the expectations you place on yourself and also those of the people around you. Some people have trouble understanding illnesses that cannot be seen. Fatigue can therefore be misinterpreted as laziness or a lack of interest. A head injury program can work with the school or an employer to make this possible.

What can you do to overcome fatigue?

- Undertake the harder activities earlier in the day, when your mind is more clear.
- You can overcome fatigue by making sure that you have a good diet, get regular rest and take breaks between activities.
- It is important to slowly get back to your everyday routine with your studies and work. Make sure that you do not over-exert yourself beyond your capabilities.

When returning to physical activity, make sure you follow a gradual return to physical activity program, as prescribed by your doctor.