

Fatigue and IBD

This information sheet is for people living with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) who want to learn about why fatigue occurs and how to manage it.

Key points

- Fatigue is a common complication for people with IBD.
- There are many reasons why people with IBD may experience fatigue, but symptoms and medication are the main causes.
- Speaking about fatigue with your doctor may help you find the reason/s for your fatigue and ways to manage it even if it isn't caused by IBD.

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is an overwhelming sense of ongoing tiredness, lack of energy, or feeling of exhaustion that doesn't get better after rest or sleep. It is more than just the tiredness people may feel after doing a lot of physical or mental activity.

When people with IBD experience fatigue, they may feel a lack of energy or strength in their body. Fatigue can also affect motivation and concentration, and there will seem to be no reason to feel this way. The unpredictable nature of fatigue in IBD is part of the reason why it is so hard to manage.

How does IBD cause fatigue?

Over three-quarters of people experience fatigue during a flare-up of their disease and half experience fatigue while in remission. There are a number of potential causes of fatigue in IBD and sometimes a combination may contribute to low energy:

- **Inflammation and pain** – an inflamed gut may influence the brain, reducing motivation, appetite and energy, and causing pain. Pain can also be caused by constipation, or bowel blockages which need to be treated by a doctor. Managing pain can be exhausting.
- **Nutrition** – it can be hard for the body to absorb nutrients when the gut is inflamed which can lead to low nutrition and fatigue.
- **Psychological distress:** People with IBD often experience anxiety, depression and stress. Psychological health and fatigue have been linked, but it is not known if emotional stress causes fatigue or the other way around.
- **Medication:** Steroids and other medications that affect the immune system can cause fatigue in some people.
- **Sleep:** Pain and using the toilet multiple times at night can affect sleep quality.

How can fatigue affect people with IBD?

Normal everyday tasks may take greater effort. Each person will have a different experience of fatigue but there are common areas of life that can be affected:

- **Physical activity** – Participating in sport may be very hard and some people will find it hard to do housework, drive or even move around the house.
- **Concentration** – Thinking and focusing can become difficult when fatigued.
- **Social life** – Because fatigue can come on without warning, it can be hard to make plans to see friends, travel or maintain your hobbies and interests.
- **Relationships** – It can be hard to explain IBD fatigue to friends and family, and their lack of understanding can affect your relationships negatively.
- **Work and education** – Depending on your fatigue level, you may or may not be able to manage a full-time job or work at all. Students affected by fatigue may also find it difficult to manage their studies.

How can I manage fatigue?

Because there are so many reasons why you may be feeling fatigued, your first step should be talking with your doctor. They can check to see if your disease is active and if you have any nutritional deficiencies. They can also find a different medication if you think you're experiencing fatigue as a side effect of your current medication.

There's also evidence that light physical activity may reduce fatigue caused by IBD. It's important to remember is to listen to your body and rest when you need to. It may mean changing your lifestyle – what you eat, how you exercise and how you work. Learning to prioritise your health is crucial when managing IBD.

More detailed information about fatigue, including explaining your fatigue to people in your life and 'Spoon theory' for IBD, is available on the Crohn's & Colitis Australia website. You can access the website through the QR code below.

For help or information

Scan QR code for website:



Use the website search function to find related pages:

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