

MANAGING FATIGUE

FATIGUE & SCLERODERMA

Everybody gets tired from time to time. Fatigue from scleroderma, however, is different from normal tiredness in that it is often not related to physical exertion and not helped by getting enough rest. For many people with scleroderma, doing their daily activities or putting in a full day at work is exhausting. By the end of the day there is barely enough energy left over for spending time with your family or for enjoying hobbies and other activities.

Fatigue often develops gradually in scleroderma. You may not notice how tired you are until someone else points it out, or you realize you can't do some of your old activities. It is wrong to think of fatigue as a personal weakness or as failing. Your body is less capable of using energy reserved for everyday activities because some of this energy is used in the body's attempt to heal itself.

WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF YOUR FATIGUE?

If fatigue is a problem for you, the first job is to try to determine the cause.

[It's important to remember that fatigue can be caused by, and made worse by, things other than scleroderma.](#)

It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between fatigue due to scleroderma and that due to depression or feelings of hopelessness.

COPING WITH FATIGUE

Fatigue is hard to treat. There aren't any medications that you can take that will return your old energy, but there are some things you can stop doing that might be making your fatigue worse:

BE REALISTIC

Before you had scleroderma, running a home and a full time job may not have been enough to make you tired. You may find now that balancing work and family leaves you exhausted. Even doing a couple of loads of laundry and making lunch can leave some patients very tired.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS AND WORK WITHIN THEM

In this way, you can gradually increase them. You must be especially careful not to overdo it when you are beginning to feel better again.

PACE YOURSELF

If you know that you can be active for 15 minutes before your symptoms worsen, do an activity for only 15 minutes, then rest, and repeat. Don't try to finish an activity before taking a break if needed.

STAY ACTIVE

Inactivity can worsen fatigue. A nap can help you, but staying in bed all day may actually make your fatigue worse. Physical activity or an exercise program may help you to feel more energized. Taking a short walk instead of lying down the next time you're feeling tired may actually help.

IMPROVE YOUR NUTRITION

Food is our basic source of fuel for energy. We can feel fatigued if we are not well nourished. Maintain a healthy weight and improve the quality and quantity of your food if your fatigue is made worse by a poor diet.

BE MINDFUL OF YOUR MOOD

Remember that depression can cause fatigue.

TALK WITH YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT YOUR FATIGUE

Your physician may help you identify other causes and ways to best cope with your fatigue. It's not always easy to pinpoint a problematic lack of energy so the best advice is to pay close attention to exactly how it feels so you can describe it to your doctor in detail.

THINK ABOUT YOUR SLEEP HABITS

Not getting enough sleep or having poor quality sleep can add to your fatigue.

GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP

Sleep is important for everyone, and even more so for people who suffer from chronic illness such as scleroderma. Sleep difficulties can make coping with scleroderma more difficult.

If you are not getting 8 hours of sound sleep each night, if you do not wake up feeling refreshed or if you sleep more than 10 hours a day, and if any of these conditions have existed for more than 2 weeks: it is time to see your doctor. Be sure to ask for a sleep clinic evaluation if you have any symptoms of sleep apnea, such as snoring or interrupted breathing.

TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP

Keep a regular sleep schedule. Set a fixed bedtime and waking time.

Invest in a comfortable mattress, bedding and pillows. Make your bed as comfortable as possible.

Minimize distracting light and noise.

Avoid caffeine (commonly found in coffee, tea, chocolate) for at least six hours before bedtime.

Avoid heavy meals close to bedtime. Spicy or fatty foods may be particularly troublesome because they are associated with acid reflux.

Avoid alcohol close to bedtime. Alcohol can make you drowsy but as your body begins to metabolize it, REM sleep, the period where your sleep is most restorative, is reduced.

Raise the head of your bed a few inches to reduce acid reflux/GERD.

Put away electronics such as laptops, cell phones, TVs and tablets well before bedtime. If you use an electronic reader, turn the light level low.

Ask your doctor whether the time of day you take your medications or supplements may be keeping you awake.

We would like to thank **Dr. Evelyn Sutton, MD, FRCPC, FACP** for her assistance with this information pamphlet.

DISCLAIMER: This pamphlet is meant to provide information on scleroderma and is not meant to be used as a diagnostic tool or to suggest treatment or medications. Always consult your physician regarding details of symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment.

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