

## **A Yawn and a Stretch too Many – Battling Fatigue in a ‘Tiring’ World**

Moms’ Health Club’s theme for 2011 is ‘The Good Health and Wealth of Ghana starts with Me’. This is a follow-up to the 2010 theme, which was ‘Your Health, Your Responsibility – Take Control’. My goal is not to make you experts in healthcare, but to raise awareness and emphasize the point that we are all in a position to improve our health.

Doctors rarely complete a day’s work at the clinic without talking to a patient who complains of fatigue. The whole world appears to be in the ‘fast lane’, and it is almost fashionable to complain of fatigue. Colette Bouchez refers to this fatigue syndrome as ‘a global energy crisis that has nothing to do with oil’, and I totally agree with her. We all experience fatigue once a while, but when we know the likely cause(s) we are in a position to make the right choices to correct it. Many of us may confuse fatigue with weakness, and this may throw our diagnosis in a totally different direction. Always remember that the information we give our healthcare professional goes a long way to determine the conclusion he/she will draw.

Weakness is ‘a lack of physical or muscle strength and a feeling that extra effort is needed to perform daily activities that require you to move your arms, legs or other muscles’.

FATIGUE, on the other hand, is ‘a feeling of tiredness, exhaustion or lack of energy’.

According to the folks at Mayo Clinic, all our complaints of fatigue can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Lifestyle Factors, e.g. lack of adequate sleep, cigarette smoking, etc.
2. Psychological Factors, e.g. stress, depression, grief, etc.
3. Medical Conditions, e.g. thyroid disease, liver and kidney disorders, etc.

Dear reader, do not attempt to make any ridiculous diagnoses just because you experienced fatigue for a few days. Only a trained healthcare professional can make a diagnosis, combining the information you provide with the doctor’s examination findings and relevant investigations.

### **1. Lifestyle Factors**

- a. Lack of adequate sleep: you may be able to rob yourself of sleep for a while, but consistently sleeping for four or five hours a day will eventually bring on fatigue. Some of us may think we get adequate sleep, but we may be suffering from sleep apnoea and hence interrupt our sleep several times without knowing. Fatigue and dozing during the day becomes our trademark. Look out, especially if everyone complains about your snoring. If you are overweight, it may be a brilliant idea to start with some weight loss.

- b. Not enough fuel: Food is fuel for our body, and if we starve or deprive the body of certain components of a balanced diet, it will come as no surprise if we often feel tired.
- c. Caffeine overload/Excess alcohol consumption: Caffeine, like alcohol, may have some good points, but never be deceived! A glass or cup too many will surely bring fatigue in its tracks, along with some troubling news about your heart that will cause you to lose more sleep, and worsen your fatigue.
- d. Shift work sleep disorder: The challenges of modern life mean that some of us need to work when our biological clocks and other physical factors make sleep so welcoming. Working for long periods on the night shift, for instance, makes it difficult to sleep during the day (sometimes through no fault of ours, and other instances totally by our own fault).
- e. Dehydration: This could be self-inflicted by not taking adequate fluids (like water). I've actually read a few times that we should only drink water when we are thirsty. NEVER try that!!!! Your body always needs water. I mentioned a few weeks ago that it is rare for most people to overload themselves with water. If you need to restrict your intake of water, your doctor will advise you on that. In some cases, however, dehydration may be the result of severe burns, an illness, trauma (with bleeding), and so on.

## **2. Psychological Problems**

- a. Stress: Whether physical or emotional, stress can often lead to fatigue, and the yawning and stretching will go unabated. Please do not start pointing to all yawners as being tired. Who knows - it may be from good old hunger: the body's own prompting to refuel it. Normally, the fatigue from stress persists till the cause is removed.
- b. Depression and Anxiety: These bed-fellows are notorious for causing a lot of woe, and quite often they attack together. Yes, one may be predominant, but always look out for the other. They torment you so much that you feel fatigued all the time. A favourite path they plough is to mess up your sleep and also stress you out psychologically.
- c. Grief: Mourning the loss of someone dear, or crying over 'spilt milk' has its own mode of payment, and my brilliant reader, you guessed right. Fatigue is the price we pay.

### 3. Medical Conditions:

- a. Anaemia: Whatever the cause may be, anaemia affects the effective transfer of oxygen to the cells, and fatigue is one of its symptoms. Some anaemia may be purely self-inflicted. If we skip meals (fuel for the body, remember!) in a dangerous attempt to lose weight, we may end up developing anaemia.
- b. Thyroid Disease: Both hypo and hyperthyroidism may present with fatigue.
- c. Diabetes: Sometimes, Type II Diabetes may only present as fatigue. It's time to check your blood sugar, if you haven't since we launched this crusade.
- d. Heart Disease: Many heart diseases, including heart attacks, may present with only fatigue. This feeling subsides when we manage the condition appropriately.
- e. Infections: It's impossible to run away from these. They are numerous, and I will only mention a handful: 'hidden' urinary tract infection, malaria, typhoid, and even viral infections such as the common cold.
- f. Food Allergies: Sometimes, instead of the often common tell-tale signs of an allergy, fatigue is the only way our body may react to certain foods it would rather do without.

Of all the causes of fatigue, my favourite is 'The Working Mom's Syndrome'. I am not sure if this phrase has been coined yet, but all ladies who have to juggle work (remember stay-at-home moms also have a lot on their plates) and taking care of under-ten-year olds, will swear they are destined for the Intensive Care Unit. Make no assumptions, my dear reader, this diagnosis is purely one of exclusion. Essentially, your doctor should have considered all the various causes of fatigue before settling for this one.

When fatigue persists for over six months, we are wading into the area of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and our management may require medical/psychological means.

So when you next feel extremely tired:

- Go through your check list
- Talk to your healthcare professional
- Start mild exercising, three days a week, after seeking clearance from your doctor, and surely all other things will be added unto you.

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[www.healthclubsggh.com](http://www.healthclubsggh.com)

References:

- Mayoclinic.com

- [Webmd.com](http://Webmd.com)