

Fatigue in Teens

The symptoms of sleepiness and fatigue are frequently encountered when caring for adolescents. Up to 40% of healthy teens experience regular sleepiness, defined as an increased tendency to fall asleep. Fatigue is the perception of low energy following normal activity and is reported by up to 30% of well teens. A thorough assessment is required for all teens with sleepiness and fatigue; however, a treatable underlying medical condition is rarely found. Most fatigue and sleepiness in teens is attributable to lifestyle issues, notably too little time spent sleeping or poor sleep quality.

- Unexplained fatigue in teens is common and is probably related to the combination of rapid physical and psychological change, which can leave some teens feeling exhausted.
- Although there are no tests to confirm the fatigue, we know the symptoms are real.
- For some teens, the fatigue is triggered by something, eg, an illness, or a time when competing demands have left the teen physically and emotionally overwhelmed with too many obligations.
- For some teens with chronic fatigue, the symptom has become a vicious cycle – fatigue limits what the teen is able to do, then inactivity and isolation lead to deconditioning and mood changes, which results in further fatigue.
- Fatigue is manageable and most teens recover, although sometimes this takes months or even years.
- Despite the fact that we do not know the cause, we do know which interventions are helpful for most teens with fatigue.

Guidance for teens getting too little sleep:

- Have a relaxing bedtime routine. Always fall asleep in your bed, not in front of the television.
- Try to be in your bed at least 8 h per day. Many teens need 9 h or 10 h to not feel sleepy during the day.
- Try to go to bed at approximately the same time every night.
- Open the curtains or turn on the lights as soon as you get up in the morning.
- Be active every day, but avoid vigorous exercise in the evening.
- Avoid all products with caffeine after mid-day.
- Avoid napping during the day. If you do, keep it short (less than 30 min).
- On weekends, no matter how late you go to bed, try to get up within 2 h of your usual wake time.
- Have a light snack (such as a glass of milk) before bed.
- Use your bed for sleeping only, do not do homework, watch television or spend time talking on the telephone while in your bed.
- Avoid using any products to help you sleep (including alcohol, herbal products or over-the-counter sleep aids).

An approach to managing the fatigued teen

- The first goal is to improve function through increased activity and fitness, in spite of the symptoms, which often are slower to resolve.
- Care must be taken to not overwhelm the teen with too many expectations, because this may make the fatigue worse.
- Priority should be given to school and socialization before employment, chores and extracurricular activities. Returning to one class at school per day and one evening out with friends per week may be a good place to start.
- The teen should be provided with advice about sleep hygiene and regular, balanced eating.
- Graded exercise therapy, coordinated by a physical therapist, can be very helpful.
- Counselling, specifically cognitive behavioral therapy, has been studied in randomized trials and appears to be effective.
- Medications for pain (acetaminophen or ibuprofen) can be prescribed at appropriate doses.
- In the absence of a major depressive episode, there is no evidence that antidepressants improve the symptoms or the global functioning in teens with chronic fatigue.