Dear Alice,

What causes constant fatigue? I read that iron-deficiency could cause it. With all these new diet fads and push for dietary supplements, is there anything that helps or hurts energy levels (ex. eating or not eating carbs, taking or not taking certain supplements, etc.)

Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Feeling constantly fatigued may be influenced from a variety of factors. Some are easily identified, such as a busy schedule or intense daily workouts. Other times, the fatigue may be an indicator of something more serious. It may be helpful to start by adjusting some lifestyle factors that may be contributing, such as sleep habits, drug and alcohol use, too much or too little physical activity, or eating habits, and then reaching out to a health care provider if the problem persists beyond two weeks. Incremental changes may be taken to assist in starting to feel more energetic, such as sleeping seven to eight hours every night, spending time with loved ones, and getting regular physical activity. A balanced diet high in fruits and vegetables, lean protein, low-fat dairy, and whole grains helps keep a body properly fueled. However, it's also possible that a medication or more serious condition, such as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) or anemia, may be the culprit, which is why a health care provider's advice may be helpful. In addition, if experiencing chest pain, shortness of breath, irregular or fast heartbeat, feelings of faintness, and severe abdominal pain, bleeding, and severe headache, it's advised to seek medical care immediately. Want to know more? Read on!

If implementing small lifestyle changes doesn't seem to help, a health care provider may test for different medical conditions. One possible condition that isn't very well understood by medical professionals and researchers is CFS. It's a complex disorder characterized by excessive fatigue not explained by an underlying medical condition. CFS doesn't go away with rest but might get worse with additional physical activity or mental stress. Experts believe that it may be triggered by a combination of factors (ranging from viral infections to hormonal imbalances), but the cause is still unknown. Some of its signs and symptoms include loss of memory or concentration, sore throat, enlarged lymph nodes in the neck or armpits, unexplained muscle or joint pain, headaches, unrefreshing sleep, and extreme exhaustion for more than 24 hours after physical or mental activity. Because the cause still isn't understood,
health care providers often focus on helping patients find ways to alleviate some of the symptoms.

In the case of anemia, lack of iron in the bloodstream might cause excessive fatigue, as well as other symptoms. Iron deficiency anemia may be caused by blood loss, lack of dietary iron, difficulty with iron absorption, and pregnancy. Iron-rich foods may reduce the risk of this anemia. For example, red meat, pork and poultry, seafood, beans, dark green leafy vegetables, dried fruits, and iron-fortified cereals, breads and pastas are great sources of dietary iron. Vitamin C may also enhance the body's absorption of iron. In some cases, additional tests and treatments, including taking iron supplementation, might be necessary.

Ultimately, what's key is determining what's causing fatigue, whether it's a simple lifestyle switch or a more serious health condition. Excessive fatigue might trigger or worsen anxiety or depression and reduce motivation, energy, and concentration. Working with a health care provider may help provide better understanding of how to cope with this fatigue and achieve more balance in life. In the meantime, check out the Sleep section in the Go Ask Alice! archives for more information about getting some quality rest.

Here's to those yawns becoming sighs of relief,

Alice!

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