



# THE PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANT LEARN & ADVISE



MODULE 23: MARCH 2017

# Tiredness & fatigue

One in five people feel unusually tired at any one time. But while this may be common, it's not normal and if not dealt with effectively, fatigue can have a profound effect on physical and mental health, as well as work and relationships.



## OBJECTIVES

After studying this module, assistants will:

- Understand what causes tiredness and be able to recognise people who are more likely to suffer from it
- Know when to refer to the pharmacist
- Know which treatment and self care options are available.

There is no hard and fast medical definition of tiredness, but most people would agree that it is characterised by a decrease in or absence of energy, as well as physical and mental exhaustion. It is important to remember that perceptions and experiences of fatigue are subjective. In other words, what one person considers exhaustion may well be what someone else regards as part of everyday life.

There are some groups of people who seem more likely to experience fatigue than others, such as women and people with long-term physical and mental health conditions. No age group is exempt, although fatigue appears to be less common among the very young and the very old.

The prognosis for fatigue is positive and many people who seek medical advice do not require any follow-up care. A good recovery is especially likely in those whose fatigue is of short duration or low severity. People who have no carer responsibilities, good social support, are not in pain and have good mental health are also more likely to get better without any problems. Men also tend to recover more quickly and more completely than women.

On the flip side, the complications of energy levels not being restored include a negative impact on relationships, friendships and work, as well as an increased risk of serious conditions, including obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

This module is suitable for all members of the pharmacy team who wish to increase their knowledge of common conditions and treatment options. This module has been endorsed with the NPA's Training Seal as suitable for use by pharmacy teams as part of their ongoing learning. This module can also form part of your Team Tuesday training.



# Understanding the problem



*Women tend to feel tired more often than men.*

The Royal College of Psychiatrists states that at any given time, one in every five people feel unusually tired and one in 10 have prolonged fatigue. It's unusual for there to be a medical cause for this tiredness, unless there are other symptoms too, such as heavy periods, weight loss or a change in bowel habits. More often than not, fatigue is linked with mood, the accumulation of stress and lifestyle factors. There are three main categories that the causes of tiredness fall into:

- 1** **Physical causes** include conditions often associated with tiredness, such as pregnancy, glandular fever, anaemia, cancer and an underactive thyroid. But there are some less obvious but nonetheless common culprits, such as diabetes, autoimmune disorders and liver, heart and respiratory illnesses. Painful conditions like arthritis can also be very tiring, as can being significantly under- or overweight.
- 2** **Psychological causes** include depression, insomnia, anxiety and stress – whether this is negative (e.g. related to work or relationship issues or bereavement) or positive (e.g. getting married or moving house). It is worth noting that, contrary to popular opinion, tiredness with a psychological cause is much more common than tiredness caused by a physical problem.
- 3** **Lifestyle causes** can include drinking too much alcohol (particularly in the evening); suffering from disturbed sleep (most commonly because of caring for young children, shift work or sleeping during the day) or not getting enough sleep; too high a caffeine intake (six cups of coffee or 10 cups of tea a day can have an adverse effect); and exercising excessively.

## When to refer

**Certain symptoms should ring warning bells, so get your pharmacist involved if a customer reports any of the following alongside tiredness:**

- Significant and unintentional weight loss
- Signs that could indicate a neurological problem (e.g. loss of vision or coordination)
- Symptoms of malignancy (e.g. a lump, rectal or post-menopausal vaginal bleeding, difficulty swallowing or vomiting blood) or an infection (e.g. night sweats or a fever)
- Suspected carbon monoxide poisoning (symptoms would include headache, dizziness, nausea, breathlessness and a raised heart rate)
- Anything that indicates an undiagnosed chronic condition (e.g. breathing difficulties suggest COPD, while tiredness that is worse in the morning hints at depression)
- Persistent or recurrent fatigue (although not life-long), which might point towards chronic fatigue syndrome.

Tiredness can be a side effect of many medicines – from prescription drugs such as painkillers, sedatives and blood pressure medication to over-the-counter remedies for hayfever and herbal products. So always ask your pharmacist to step in if someone is complaining of fatigue and tells you that they are taking any medicines at all.



# Managing tiredness

## ? DID YOU KNOW?

Customers might feel too tired to exercise, but regular exercise will make them feel less tired in the long run and give them more energy.



There are several steps that can be put in place to address factors that may be causing tiredness and restore energy levels. These include:

- **Improving sleep** by sticking to regular times for going to bed and waking up; keeping the bedroom quiet and at a comfortable temperature; reducing daytime napping; avoiding eating and drinking late at night, and relaxing before bed by taking a hot bath, listening to music, reading or using a relaxation technique
- **Taking regular exercise** can increase energy levels but may be difficult to contemplate for those who are feeling tired. The key is to start with something small but regular, such as walking, then slowly increase the duration over weeks or months, with the aim of improving fitness, strength and stamina
- **Reducing stress levels** by introducing relaxing pursuits such as yoga or spending time with friends
- **Stopping smoking** and cutting back on alcohol and caffeine as these can all affect sleep, which in turn impacts on energy levels the next day. Reducing these slowly may be easier than quitting abruptly and will help limit withdrawal symptoms
- **Eating a healthy diet**, with the aim of getting to and/or maintaining a healthy body mass index (BMI)
- **Planning activities** so that a frantically busy day does not result in being able to do nothing the next day because of exhaustion. A little every day is much more sensible
- **Managing expectations** so that they are realistic in terms of improving energy levels and maintaining them. It can be helpful for people to reflect on whether they were expecting too much of themselves and if they have struck a good balance between work and other obligations and rest and leisure activities.



## OTC remedies

Unfortunately, there is no pill to cure tiredness, although there are lots of products and techniques that claim to be able to do so.

- Vitamin supplements are popular, but apart from a few notable exceptions, such as folic acid in pregnancy and vitamin D supplements for everyone, particularly those who don't get much sun exposure, most people can get all the nutrients they need from a healthy, balanced diet
- Energy drinks give a quick boost, thanks to their sugar and caffeine content, but the effect is temporary and can cause problems in the short term (e.g. irritability and restlessness) and in the long run (e.g. weight gain and raised blood pressure)
- Detox regimens, usually involving a strict diet of raw fruit and vegetables, often in juice form, have been debunked. After all, the kidneys are very effective and efficient at getting rid of what the body doesn't need, so a healthy, balanced diet is considered more sensible.



## SIGNPOSTING

For more information, you can:

- Use your *Counter Intelligence Plus* training guide
- Visit NHS Choices: [nhs.uk/Livewell/tiredness-and-fatigue/Pages/tiredness-and-fatigue.aspx](https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/tiredness-and-fatigue/Pages/tiredness-and-fatigue.aspx)
- Look at information provided by the Royal College of Psychiatrists: [rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/tiredness.aspx](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/tiredness.aspx)
- Find out more about healthy eating at: [nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx](https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx).



## Don't forget...

**Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS)**, which is sometimes referred to as myalgic encephalopathy or encephalomyelitis (ME), is different to everyday tiredness. It causes persistent fatigue, which can result in severe impairments to daily functioning, and does not go away with sleep or rest.

# TEST YOURSELF ONLINE

GOOD PRACTICE KNOWLEDGE IS IMPORTANT WHEN ADVISING CUSTOMERS



## Questions

- Which of the following groups are more likely to experience tiredness as a symptom?
  - Middle-aged men
  - Young children
  - Pregnant women
  - Nursing home residents
- Which of the following is **NOT** a physical cause of tiredness?
  - Anaemia
  - Underactive thyroid
  - Diabetes
  - Anxiety
- Which of the following statements about tiredness is **FALSE**?
  - Physical causes are more common than psychological causes
  - Sleeping during the day can cause tiredness
  - Tiredness can be a side-effect of medicines
  - Men tend to recover from tiredness quicker than women
- Which of the following warrants referral to the pharmacist?
  - Unexplained weight loss
  - Tiredness alongside a fever
  - Breathing difficulties
  - All of the above
- Which of the following is **NOT** good advice to help someone improve their sleep?
  - Stick to regular bed times
  - Eat just before going to bed
  - Keep the bedroom quiet and at a comfortable temperature
  - Take a bath before bed to relax
- Which of the following can help people manage their tiredness?
  - Take regular, but not excessive, exercise
  - Stop smoking and cut back on alcohol
  - Eat a healthy diet
  - All of the above

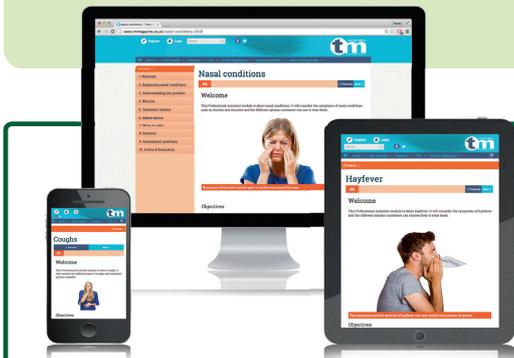
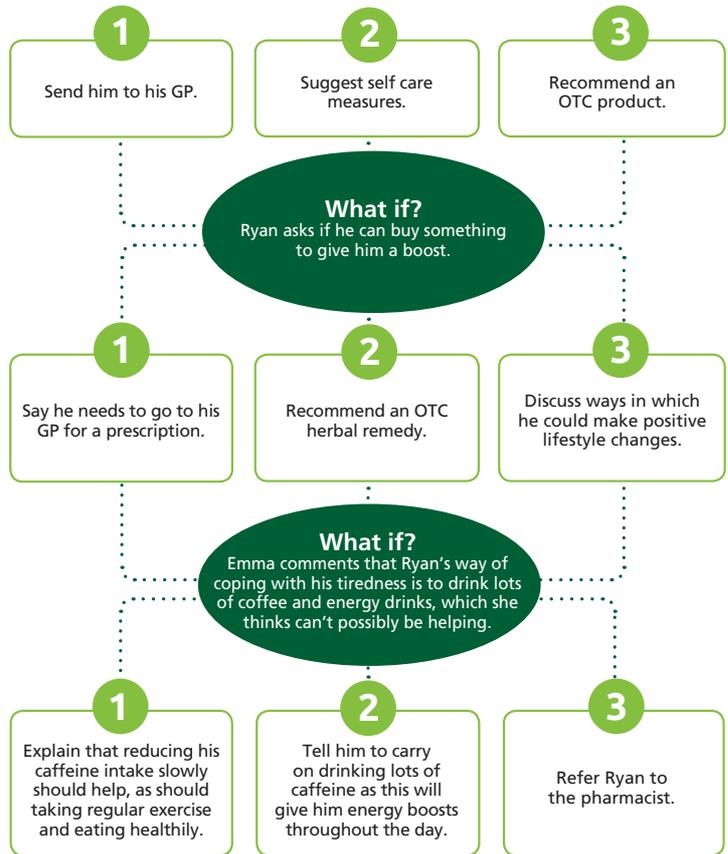


## Scenario

Ryan comes into the pharmacy with his wife Emma. You notice he looks a bit weary, so while they're paying for their purchases, you ask if he's feeling alright. He explains that generally he feels fine, but he has been really tired lately and is struggling to get through the day – he even fell asleep at his desk yesterday.

### What would you recommend?

For each part of this scenario, think about the decision you would make and, importantly, why you would choose that option. In addition, for each decision that you make, think about how you would talk to the customer and provide the necessary advice, and discuss this with your team and pharmacist.



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