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,

A person may feel constantly fatigued from a variety of factors. Some are easily identified, such as pulling a week's worth of all nighters or running multiple back to back marathons. Other times, the fatigue may be an indicator or symptom of an illness like the cold or flu in the body. Additionally, a similarly-named medical condition exists and is known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), or Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS). Patients with CFS experience extreme fatigue that does not improve with adequate rest and sleep. This fatigue may worsen when s/he undergoes a normal level of physical or mental activity. Other symptoms of CFS may include:

- sore throat
- enlarged lymph nodes
- loss of memory or concentration
- unexplained muscle soreness
- headaches

In 2009, evidence was found linking CFS to a virus. Scientists found this virus, called XMRV, to be highly associated with CFS although some healthy patients without CFS symptoms also tested positive for XMRV. This could mean that the virus is a direct cause of CFS or it could indicate that XMRV is simply more common in people with CFS because their immune systems are otherwise compromised. Several other theories exist. Some of these theories propose that CFS is diet related, citing hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) and iron deficiency anemia as related conditions. Others link CFS to viral infections like Epstein-Barr or human herpes virus 6. While it is still uncertain whether CFS is caused by a virus, other conditions, or a combination, the discovery of the association between XMRV and CFS symptoms could assist in the diagnosis of CFS and may eventually lead to improved treatments.

Because the cause is still not understood, health care providers often focus on alleviating some of the symptoms and coping with CFS. This may include getting gradual but steady
exercise, eliminating psychological and physical stressors from your environment, and pacing yourself during activities.

Medications to treat low blood pressure, pain, allergies, psychological conditions, and other ailments associated with CFS may also be prescribed. While there are currently no known foods, food groups, diets, or vitamins that improve or decrease energy levels in CFS patients, it's important to maintain a healthy lifestyle, which includes limiting caffeine, eating a balanced diet, and drinking plenty of fluids. Speak to a health care provider before beginning any treatment of CFS. Students at Columbia can call x4-2284 or log on to Open Communicator to make an appointment with a health care provider.

For more information on CFS, including other tips on managing the illness, check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's CFS Treatment Options: Coping and Managing website and the American Academy of Family Physicians' Chronic Fatigue Syndrome website.

The bottom line if you are experiencing continuous fatigue is to arrange your life so you can achieve a balance of working, eating healthfully, exercising moderately, and resting enough. Good luck as you sort out your symptoms and the possible root causes, Alice!

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