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Psoriatic Fatigue

This information is produced by the Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance

www.papaa.org



What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand what fatigue is and why it happens in people affected by psoriatic conditions. We will also address myths and misconceptions and generally how to cope and manage the symptoms.

About psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis

Psoriasis (sor-i'ah-sis) is a long-term (chronic) scaling disease of the skin which affects around 1 in 50 people, which is about 1.3 million, or around 2% of the UK population. It usually appears as red, raised, scaly patches known as plaques. Any part of the skin surface may be involved but the plaques most commonly appear on the elbows, knees and scalp. It can be itchy but is not usually painful. Nail changes, including pitting and ridging, are present in nearly half of all those who have psoriasis. See our **Nail Psoriasis** leaflet.

For those that have psoriasis around 1 in 4 may develop an associated psoriatic arthritis (PsA), which is about 325,000 people, or around 0.5% of the UK population. PsA causes pain and swelling in the joints and tendons, accompanied by stiffness, particularly in the mornings, although some people experience this for a longer period of the day. The most commonly affected sites are the hands, wrists, feet, ankles, lower back, neck and knees, with movement in these areas becoming severely limited.

What happens in psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis?

In psoriasis the skin matures much quicker than would normally be seen. New skin cells are produced every 4 – 7 days, compared to the normal process of 21-28 days. This process is the same wherever it occurs on the body. Psoriasis is not contagious; therefore it cannot be caught from another person. In psoriatic arthritis joints, tendons and connective tissue become inflamed, which is due to the body's immune system reacting incorrectly. Both conditions are classed as autoimmune disorders.

Autoimmune disorders happen when the body's natural defence system cannot tell the difference between normal and abnormal cells, causing the body to mistakenly attack the normal cells believing them to be likely to cause harm. There are more than 80 types of autoimmune disorders that affect a wide range of body parts.

The extent of psoriatic disease and how it affects an individual varies from person to person. Some may be mildly affected whilst for others it significantly affects daily life and relationships. The causes of psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis are currently unknown. For more detailed information, see our leaflets ***What is psoriasis?*** and ***What is psoriatic arthritis?***

What is fatigue?

It is normal to feel tired after exertion, insufficient sleep or at the end of the day; this tiredness is usually relieved by rest or sleep. With fatigue, the symptoms often go beyond normal tiredness and can include decreased or lack of energy with accompanying physical or mental exhaustion. These symptoms usually persist even after a good night's sleep.

In the UK, 10-20% of the population report being tired for a month or longer, with 1.5% feeling a need to see their GP. The symptoms often include difficulty sleeping, muscle or joint pain, headaches, painful lymph nodes, sore throat, cognitive dysfunction (feeling sluggish, fuzzy and not sharp), symptoms made worse by physical or mental exertion, flu-like symptoms, dizziness, nausea or palpitations (fluttering heartbeats).

Why do I feel tired all the time?

People with psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis often feel tired all the time. Some people who develop this symptom think there must be something psychologically wrong with them, there isn't, fatigue is a common and recognised symptom of the conditions. It is also acknowledged that doctors underestimate fatigue as a component of psoriasis and in particular of psoriatic arthritis. People often feel frustrated about the lack of support and understanding they get when presenting with a debilitating and invisible symptom.

It appears that fatigue is more severe in people with psoriatic arthritis than those who have psoriasis alone, with studies suggesting that three out of every ten people with psoriatic arthritis have symptoms of fatigue. Fatigue may be an early symptom or sign of inflammatory activity in people who may have psoriasis and or psoriatic arthritis; both are classed as long-term inflammatory conditions. Inflammation is linked with the release of powerful chemicals. These include:

- inflammatory proteins which increase the stickiness of blood platelets
- proteins which bind to antibodies and circulate as immune complexes
- immune system chemicals that help immune cells communicate with each other, such as interleukins, especially interleukin 1.

What causes fatigue?

As described above, inflammation appears to be part of the process of feeling fatigued, but researchers do not know exactly what the link is, or how increased levels of inflammatory substances in the body influence fatigue.

Myths and misconceptions

There are many myths and misconceptions about fatigue. People are sometimes wrongly viewed as being “lazy” by their work colleagues and sometimes by their own family members.

The reason that the person affected by fatigue is unable to carry out basic everyday tasks is the inflammatory process taking place in their body. People often think that caffeine will help wake them up. As caffeine is a stimulant, the effects are short-lived; people often feel more tired once the initial effect wears off. Caffeine is typically found in coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks. Caffeine is also a diuretic, causing dehydration, which will also have a negative effect. In some instances people may resort to the use of alcohol, under the misapprehension that it will relieve the symptoms. However, alcohol is likely to make people drowsier, depressed and can affect sleep, which will also contribute to fatigue.

What can I do?

If you feel tired all the time, tell your healthcare provider, as it is important to rule out any other causes of fatigue. Sometimes you may need to have your medication changed or take tests so that what is happening, can be fully understood.

With or without medical intervention, there are a number of lifestyle changes that may help you feel generally less exhausted.

Dietary advice

- Eat a diet providing at least five servings of fresh fruit or vegetables a day
- Reduce the animal fats in your diet and avoid fatty foods as much as possible
- Eat fresh, home-made foods rather than pre-packaged convenience foods
- Increase your intake of B-group vitamins, needed for the production of energy in the body. These are found in brown rice, wholegrain bread and cereals, oatmeal and oat flakes, pulses, green leafy vegetables, oily fish and poultry
- Aim to eat more oily fish, virgin olive oil or rapeseed oil, nuts and seeds

- If you are unable to increase your intake of fish, consider taking an omega-3 fish oil supplement
- Cut back on saturated spreads and vegetable oils and products which contain them, such as shop bought biscuits and cakes
- Consider taking a vitamin and mineral supplement supplying around 100% of the recommended daily amount for as many nutrients as possible.

For further information, see our **Psoriatic Lifestyle and Nutrition** leaflet.

Behavioural changes

- Avoid things that interfere with sleep, such as caffeine, nicotine, excessive alcohol and eating rich, heavy food late at night
- Avoid excess stress
- Aim to lose excess weight.

Put yourself first

- Take some time to rest during the day
- Keep a balance between the demands on you and your energy
- Learn to say no, if possible
- Tell people when you are tired
- Avoid using unnecessary energy.

Physical activity

Some people find it difficult to get motivated and take part in some form of physical activity. As everyone has different activity levels, pain thresholds and body weight, you should start by finding activities which keep you mobile and strengthen your muscles, but which do not cause you any pain. Try to think of a physical activity that you enjoy which you can easily fit into your daily routine. If you enjoy walking, try to go for a walk a few times a week and increase the walking time by a minute or so per session. After a few weeks you will have learnt how far you can comfortably manage without experiencing pain. Other activities you may find beneficial are cycling, gentle gym exercises or more complementary therapies such as yoga or pilates. See our **Physiotherapy and Exercise: Psoriatic Arthritis** leaflet for more detail.

Balancing energy

- Try to keep back some energy for something you like to do; it will give you satisfaction and a morale boost
- Use pain relief regularly and as directed, as constant pain will make you fatigued
- Take regular, gentle exercise

- Take a rest before the children arrive home from school or if you are having visitors, as this will help you to spend more time with them
- Spread chores out over a few days rather than trying to complete them on the same day
- Stop any activity before you are too tired. Rest and then start again
- Plan your activities so that you can take time out to rest before and after
- Find time to relax by learning mindfulness or other similar relaxation techniques
- If you have been concentrating on a particular activity, you may find it helpful to follow it with some physical activity, change of scene and rest
- Sit down and use labour-saving devices when you can, as these will preserve your energy
- Be kind and gentle to yourself.

Keeping a diary

People find it difficult to understand why they feel fatigued; often there appears to be no obvious cause. You may find it useful to record the times and days you feel fatigued and for how long it lasts. Log the actions from the previous few days which might influence your energy levels, such as work, sleep, events, occasions, and even your food and drink. This may help you to understand the patterns and adjust your lifestyle and activities to reduce the incidence of fatigue. You will then be able to plan your life more effectively. It may also be useful to share this information with your healthcare provider, as they may be able to help you understand the causes.

Show and tell

Because not everyone fully understands the effects of fatigue, psoriasis or psoriatic arthritis, show family and friends a copy of this and other PAPAA information leaflets. You may find they can offer support and adjust activities and events to suit your needs.

If you are employed, it may be helpful to talk to your human resources department or your line manager, as they may be able to adjust your working environment. Under the Equality Act 2010 (Amendment) Regulations 2012, employers must make reasonable adjustments to make sure that workers with disabilities, such as physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs. This applies to all workers, including trainees, apprentices, contract workers and business partners.

Conclusion

Although it is well recognised in many published scientific studies, that fatigue is a very common symptom in both psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis, it can be difficult to express exactly how it affects you. Most people with psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis who experience fatigue will find that it leaves them debilitated and affects their ability to function or carry out daily tasks, including work and studies. Even though there may be little interest from healthcare professionals in these symptoms you should persist and continue to report them as it is an indicator of what is going on in your body. Following some of the advice listed in this leaflet may not completely solve the fatigue that you experienced, but it will go a long way to help you cope, manage and deal with the symptoms that occur.

Can I get financial support?

Many people worry about what happens if they cannot work or need financial help because of the effects of their condition. Fortunately for many, with good therapy and management their condition can be controlled and allow for a full and active working life. But if you find that, even for a short period of time, you are likely to need help, there is a wide range of disability-related financial support, including benefits, tax credits, payments, grants and concessions. The best source of information is the official government website (www.gov.uk/financial-help-disabled). You can also contact your local government or council office, where you should be directed to the appropriate resource and information. You may also wish to speak to your local Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB).

Useful contacts

For information about health matters in general and how to access services in the UK, the following websites provide national and local information.

- NHS UK: www.nhs.uk
- NHS England www.england.nhs.uk/
- NHS Scotland: www.scot.nhs.uk/
- Health in Wales: www.wales.nhs.uk
- HSCNI Services (Northern Ireland): <http://online.hscni.net>

These sites are the official sites for the National Health Service and provide links and signposting services to recognised organisations and charities.

About this information

This material was produced by PAPAA. Please be aware that research and development of treatments is ongoing.

For the latest information or any amendments to this material, please contact

us or visit our website: www.papaa.org. The site contains information on treatments and includes patient experiences and case histories.

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Quality and accuracy

To learn more about how this material was developed and produced and the criteria we use to deliver quality support and information, go to our website and read the PAPAA Pledge: www.papaa.org/pledge

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