

# Fatigue

## Beyond Tiredness



The development and printing of this booklet was sponsored by Roche Products Ltd and Chugai Pharma UK.

## Have you ever:

- Got all dressed up but felt too exhausted to go out?
- Gone hungry because you did not have the energy to prepare food for yourself?
- Fallen asleep on the sofa because you could not get yourself upstairs to bed?



## Fatigue – Beyond Tiredness

If you have Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA), it is highly likely that at some time you will experience fatigue. This leaflet has been written for people with RA and for those who have contact with them. It has been prepared with the help of people who have RA. The guide's aim is to help those with RA understand and recognise the symptoms of fatigue so that they can manage them better.



## What is fatigue?

Everybody gets tired or even exhausted sometimes, but after a few good nights sleep or a holiday they usually feel refreshed. Chronic or ongoing fatigue in RA is not like tiredness. It can last for days and no amount of sleep will relieve it. Those who have experienced it say that fatigue is as different from tiredness as flu is from a cold. It can come on without warning and prevent you from doing planned activities and everyday tasks.

People with RA compare fatigue to constantly wading through mud, or walking with bricks in your shoes. Sometimes, lifting a cup, having a bath or brushing your hair can involve more effort than you can manage.

One of the problems with fatigue is that it is an invisible symptom. Those who come into contact with you may have no idea of how you are feeling unless you tell them.

## Fatigue can make it difficult to:

- Plan ahead and stick to arrangements
- See friends and socialise
- Work
- Concentrate
- Look after your home and family
- Go shopping
- Do the activities you enjoy

## Why do people with RA feel fatigue?

Fatigue is a symptom of RA. When the disease is most active and inflammation of the joints and other tissues is at its worst, you are likely to feel exhausted more quickly and frequently. Fatigue is usually more severe in the early stages of RA and is thought to be more common in women than men. As the disease is brought under control, fatigue should decrease.

Pain can also contribute to fatigue because it drains you of energy and prevents you from sleeping properly. When people with RA are unable to exercise, their muscles can become weak: this means that every activity requires more effort, increasing fatigue. Fatigue is also a symptom of depression, which is more common in people with RA.



## What can be done?

This advice comes from people with RA:

- Pace yourself
- Know your limitations
- Listen to your body
- Adapt your lifestyle
- Don't beat yourself up because you can't do something
- Ask for help if you need it
- Manage RA, so it does not manage you
- Prioritise your activities
- Think positive
- Remember, tomorrow is another day

There is a great deal that can be done to reduce fatigue and you may need to try different approaches before you find a combination that works for you. As the inflammation that causes the symptoms is brought under control and as you adapt to the disease, fatigue should become less of a problem.

### Pacing

People with RA stress the importance of prioritising your tasks and not trying to do too much. Plan ahead. For example, if you have an activity planned for one day, ensure that the days before and after are quieter. Take a rest when you need to: do not try to fight fatigue. Break up large tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks.

### Adapt and manage RA

RA may mean you cannot do *everything* you want to, but it need not mean you cannot do *anything* you want to. It is important to try to do the things you enjoy, even if that means making adaptations. Some people find it helpful to draw up a chart of their accomplishments in the day, so they can see what they have achieved. Look out for aids and gadgets that make everyday tasks easier: an occupational therapist can give you advice. Do not be afraid to ask for help.



### Medications

Medications which control the inflammation that lies behind RA will also reduce pain, stiffness and fatigue. If you continue to suffer fatigue, tell your consultant or rheumatology specialist nurse: they may suggest changes in your medication. If you are depressed, speak to your doctor for advice on the options available to you.




### Diet

Eat a balanced, healthy diet. No special food plans or products have been proven to reduce fatigue in RA. Eating unhealthily and not doing sufficient exercise can lead to weight gain, but not eating enough can make fatigue worse. Remember to drink plenty of non-alcoholic liquids.

### Exercise and Relaxation

The right exercise regime can improve wellbeing, strength, energy levels and sleeping patterns. A physiotherapist can advise you. Relaxation techniques can help the body recharge itself and may also improve sleep.



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### **Sleep**

Work out what strategies help you to sleep better – a hot drink or a bath before bedtime; splinting troublesome joints. Make sure your bed and bedroom are comfortable and that your mattress supports you properly.



### **Complementary therapies**

No therapies have been scientifically proven to improve energy levels in people with RA, but some people gain benefit from treatments such as acupuncture aromatherapy or homeopathy. Before taking any supplements, make sure to discuss it with your doctor.

### **Talk to your specialist**

Do not ignore fatigue. Tell your consultant rheumatologist or rheumatology specialist nurse how you are feeling. They should take fatigue seriously and suggest strategies to help you. Keep raising the matter with them until your symptoms improve.



## **Further help**

For more advice on managing fatigue, contact the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society helpline on 0800 298 7650 or visit your consultant rheumatologist or rheumatology specialist nurse.

ACTE00103

PRX3373

Date of preparation: March 2009