

Fatigue in Adolescents

Feeling tired is obviously a part of our normal daily cycle. It is not uncommon for teenagers and adults to experience fatigue during the daytime occasionally. However, pervasive feeling of fatigue, tiredness, or sleepiness during the daytime indicates a problem that should be carefully considered as to cause and treatment.

Over the last several years sleep laboratories have yielded a wealth of useful information about sleep and its disturbances. By far the most common cause of daytime fatigue is a problem with inadequate or disturbed sleep. Studies have shown that teenagers today receive about an hour less sleep than teenagers had earlier this century. Most teenagers do not get enough sleep to feel awake and alert throughout the daytime. The causes for this probably stem from the increased demands for school performance and extra-curricular activities that confront most teenagers in our competitive culture. In addition some studies have shown that a teenager requires more sleep in order to feel awake and alert during the daytime than younger children.

Another common sleep disturbance in teenagers is called the delayed sleep phase cycle. Teenagers typically like to stay up late on weekend nights and sleep in late on Saturday and Sunday. Doing this often makes it difficult to fall asleep (or remain asleep) on Sunday night. Consequently, the teen starts out the week deprived of a restful night's sleep. It may take several days to compensate for this and to readjust the sleep cycle, resulting in daytime fatigue.

A rare sleep disturbance results from repetitive breath holding spells during sleep. This is called sleep apnea. It can usually be recognized by other family members. The affected individuals usually snore loudly and have periods lasting more than 10 - 15 seconds in which breathing stops. It may be caused by enlarged tonsils or adenoids. If you suspect that this may be a problem, it is a good idea to videotape the snoring/breathing pattern and bring the tape in with you for an appointment.

Depression is a significant cause of fatigue in adolescents. Typically a teenager will not simply state that they feel depressed and may be aware of the depression only in terms of a feeling of a lack of energy. A person experiencing depression may have difficulty falling asleep at bedtime and therefore not obtain adequate sleep. Or, the teen may fall asleep early in the evening only to awaken later that night and not be able to fall back asleep. This sleep disturbance results in inadequate quality sleep time. Depression often also causes feelings of a lack of energy, lack of enthusiasm for any outside interests, feeling especially fatigued in the morning, having a lack of interest in eating, and a sad demeanor. Keep in mind that a teen may display many of these symptoms and still deny feeling depressed. Depression may be situational or may not have an obvious cause. Situational depression results from some maladjustment in the teenagers life that often results in a feeling of inadequacy or stress. Temporary situations such as anxiety about a test in school affect all students from time to time. More prolonged depression may indicate a significant problem with school, home, or peer relationships. If the teen appears to be developing a pattern suggestive of this behavior talking about it may be of help. Some teenagers are unwilling to talk with their parents about these feelings and counseling may be required if the symptoms are pervasive.

Both legal and illicit drug use is another consideration. This may occur in otherwise well

behaved teenagers. Marijuana use commonly results in decreased energy level for more than a week after smoking one joint. Cocaine or amphetamine use on weekends or nights may cause changes in the wake/sleep cycle lasting all week (in addition to the withdrawal affect). Alcohol is a depressant but often results in poor quality sleep. Taking over the counter sleep hypnotics (which are usually in the antihistamine class) may cause daytime drowsiness by decreasing quality sleep. Diet pills may result in insomnia followed by fatigue. Caffeine may also cause insomnia followed by fatigue the next day.

Physical causes rarely are the source of fatigue but clearly should be considered. Physical causes of fatigue almost always occur with additional apparent symptoms. They generally to not occur in an otherwise healthy child. Symptoms that would indicate increased concern about a physical cause include pallor, chronic sore throat, swollen glands, poor growth, significant weight loss, frequent urination, an enlargement of the thyroid gland in the neck, decreased or increased appetite, increasingly severe headaches, menstrual cycle changes, vomiting, diarrhea, chronic constipation, blood in the stool or black stools, seizures, poor coordination, change in memory, or significant personality changes.

One rare disorder that deserves recognition is a syndrome called narcolepsy. This should be suspected if an individual has a tendency to fall asleep almost instantaneously at very inappropriate times. It tends to run in families.

In summary, think about the simple things first. Try an earlier bedtime. Work on trying to establish regular sleep and wake times on weekends. Avoid medications and caffeine that may interfere with normal sleep patterns. If you still have concerns, a physical exam and a few lab tests can determine if there is a medical problem.

