

# FATIGUE



POLIO  
SERVICES  
VICTORIA

A Polio Services Victoria Production

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## What Is Fatigue?

Fatigue is a sense of weariness that can be experienced in varying degrees. The excessive fatigue experienced by people with a history of polio is different to tiredness in that it is abnormal or unusual, and it is disproportionate or unrelated to physical activity (Stuifbergen & Rogers, 1997).

Bruno et al. (1996) described two types of fatigue reported by polio survivors:

1. Brain Fatigue
2. Physical Fatigue

Brain fatigue is characterized by difficulties with attention, cognition

and mental alertness. Severe brain fatigue may be seen as acute drowsiness, lethargy, disorientation and apathy.

Physical fatigue is characterized by new muscle weakness and decreased endurance. Polio survivors describe it as an increasing loss of strength during activity...increasing physical weakness... a heavy sensation of the muscles (Berly et al, 1991).

Physical fatigue can also be experienced as a global or systemic fatigue. This presents as an overwhelming exhaustion and people will often describe a sense of passivity or an aversion to activity.

## How Do I Know If I Have Fatigue?

**Sleep apnoea** can be suspected in anyone who snores at night, complains of daytime sleepiness or has morning headaches. This can be the cause of fatigue in people with impaired respiratory function. These symptoms need to be thoroughly investigated by a respiratory physician or sleep disorders clinic.

Fatigue is generally not caused by one thing. The average number of causes reported by polio survivors at Polio Services Victoria is three. This highlights the complex nature of fatigue, making it difficult not only to measure, but treat. These findings were also demonstrated by Gowne and Halstead (1995) who reported

that fatigue could be caused by a number of factors. They identified

**Fatigue is often reported as the most debilitating symptom of post polio syndrome.**

physical activity as the number one cause of fatigue followed by sleep disturbances, medication

and depression. It is therefore important that the symptoms of fatigue are thoroughly investigated as there may be an underlying medical cause that is not related to polio. There are numerous factors that need to be ruled out other than those already mentioned. For example inadequate diet, stress, chronic pain and sleep disorders to name a few.

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## Multidisciplinary Team:

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Specialist  
Physiotherapist  
Orthotist  
Occupational Therapist

Clinics:  
Specialist Assessment  
Treatment Planning

Metropolitan  
Regional

## How Does It Affect My Life?

Fatigue is experienced by people who have had polio at different times of the day, and for varying durations. A study of fatigue at St Vincent's Hospital in 2001 indicated the following results:

- 50% of participants had experienced fatigue daily over the last month.
- 32% would wake feeling fatigued.
- 29% stated that fatigue would begin by mid morning.
- 16% stated that fatigue would begin in the evening.

The duration of the fatigue experienced by the people surveyed varied as follows:

- 50% of people reported feeling fatigued all day.
- 39% of people reported their fatigue lasted for 6-12 hours at a time.
- 32% of people had fatigue that lasted less than 3 hours.

Of all the people who reported the symptoms of fatigue 85% had been experiencing them for over 12 months.

## Activities Limited By Fatigue

Seventy five percent of participants in the St Vincent's Hospital study of fatigue in polio survivors reported that fatigue did impact on their daily activities. The activities most frequently reported as being restricted by fatigue involved maintaining the home.

These included:

- Housework (55%)
- Gardening (31%)
- Cooking (11%)

Activities requiring concentration or

social interaction were less frequently reported as being restricted. Socialising and reading were affected in 4% of cases and concentration was only reported by 2% of people as being affected by their fatigue.

Writing is an activity that has both a physical and cognitive component. This was reported as being affected by fatigue in 9% of participants.

## Conclusion

Gradually the awareness and understanding of fatigue in polio survivors is becoming clearer.

Fatigue can manifest itself in many different ways. It would appear that for the majority of polio survivors who attend Polio Services Victoria fatigue has the greatest impact on physical functioning and to a lesser extent on cognitive and psychosocial functioning.

This impacts on the ability of the person to balance all the different activities required to lead a full yet satisfying life.

Findings from current research would suggest that there are effective interventions available to help manage fatigue. The challenge for the person who is experiencing fatigue is learning to use these energy conservation techniques and incorporate them into their everyday lifestyle.