

Fatigue

Why am I tired all the time?

Feeling exhausted is so common that it has its own acronym, TATT, which stands for 'tired all the time'.

At any given time, one in five people feels unusually tired, and one in 10 have prolonged fatigue, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Women tend to feel tired more than men.

“There’s more chance of a medical reason for tiredness if there are other symptoms as well, such as heavy periods, weight loss, a change in bowel habits, hair loss, extreme thirst and so on.”

If you want to work out how you became tired in the first place, it can help to think about:

parts of your life, such as work and family, that might be particularly tiring

any events that may have triggered your tiredness, for instance, a bereavement or relationship break-up

how your lifestyle may be making you tired.

Physical causes of tiredness

There are lots of health complaints that can make you feel tired. Not just the well-recognised ones like anaemia and thyroid problems, but also more surprising ailments, such as diabetes and food intolerance.

Being overweight or underweight can cause tiredness. That’s because your body has to work harder than normal to do everyday activities. If you’re underweight, you have less muscle strength, and you may feel tired more quickly.

Pregnancy, especially in the first 12 weeks, can also sap your energy.

Psychological causes of tiredness

Psychological tiredness is far more common than tiredness that's caused by a physical problem.

One key reason is anxiety, which can cause insomnia and in turn lead to persistent fatigue. A survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that nearly a third of the population are severely sleep-deprived, often because of job and money worries. The Foundation's report, *Sleep Matters*, suggests a link between insomnia and low energy levels.

The worries and strains of daily life can be exhausting, even positive events, such as moving house or getting married. And emotional shock, such as bad news, bereavement or the break-up of a relationship, can make you feel drained.

Mental health problems such as depression or anxiety can make you feel more tired. They can also prevent you from getting a proper night's sleep.

If you think your tiredness may be rooted in low mood, try this short audio-guide to dealing with your sleep problems.

Lifestyle causes of tiredness

Tiredness can often be attributed to lifestyle factors, such as drinking too much alcohol, or having a bad diet. If you drink alcohol in the evening, it tends to wake you in the middle of the night. And if you drink a lot regularly, it can make you depressed and affect your sleep. If you have a disturbed sleep pattern – for instance if you work night shifts, sleep in the day or look after young children – it can be difficult to get a good night's sleep, and you'll feel tired during the day.

How to tackle tiredness

It may be common to feel tired all the time but it isn't normal. If you're worried, see your doctor for advice and reassurance.

Why lack of sleep is bad for your health

Many effects of a lack of sleep, such as feeling grumpy and not working at your best, are well known. But did you know that sleep deprivation can also have profound consequences for your physical health?

When you might need more sleep than normal

There are some situations when you'll need more than the standard eight hours of sleep a night. It's not unusual to want 10-15 hours of rest and sleep a day if you are:

recovering from illness

pregnant

living with a chronic illness

have been through extreme physical exertion, such as running a marathon

One in three suffers from poor sleep, with stress, computers and taking work home often blamed for the lack of quality slumber.

However, the cost of all those sleepless nights is more than just bad moods and a lack of focus.

Regular poor sleep puts you at risk of serious medical conditions including obesity, heart disease and diabetes – and it shortens your life expectancy.

It's now clear that a solid night's sleep is essential for a long and healthy life.

How much sleep do we need?

Most of us need around eight hours of good quality sleep a night to function properly – but some need more and some less. What matters is that you find out how much sleep you need and then try to achieve it.

As a general rule, if you wake up tired and spend the day longing for a chance to have a nap, it's likely that you're not getting enough sleep.

A variety of factors can cause poor sleep, including health conditions such as sleep apnoea. But in most cases it's a matter of bad sleeping habits.

What happens if I don't sleep?

Oversleeping

Although it isn't as common as not getting enough sleep, sleeping too much can also cause problems.

Oversleeping has been linked to physical problems such as diabetes and heart disease.

According to the Mental Health Foundation, oversleeping can occur in 15-40% of people with depression.

Everyone's experienced the fatigue, short temper and lack of focus that often follow a poor night's sleep.

An occasional night without sleep makes you feel tired and irritable the next day, but it won't harm your health.

After several sleepless nights, the mental effects become more serious. Your brain will fog, making it difficult to concentrate and make decisions. You'll start to feel down, and may drop off during the day. Your risk of injury and accidents at home, work and on the road increases.

If it continues, lack of sleep can affect your overall health and make you prone to serious medical conditions such as obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Here are seven ways in which a good night's sleep can boost your health:

1. Sleep boosts immunity

If you seem to catch every cold and flu that's going around, your bedtime could be to blame. Prolonged lack of sleep can disrupt your immune system, so you're less able to fend off bugs.

2. Sleep can slim you down

Sleeping less can make you weigh more! Studies have shown that people who sleep less than seven hours a day are 30% more likely to be obese than those who get nine hours of sleep or more.

It's believed to be because sleep-deprived people have reduced levels of leptin, the chemical that makes you feel full and increased levels of ghrelin, the hunger-stimulating hormone.

3. Sleep boosts your mental wellbeing

Given that a single sleepless night can make you irritable and moody the following day, it's not surprising that chronic sleep debt may lead to long-term mood disorders like depression and anxiety.

When people with anxiety or depression were surveyed to calculate their sleeping habits, it turned out that most of them slept for less than six hours a night.

4. Sleep prevents diabetes

Studies have suggested that people who usually sleep less than five hours a night have an increased risk of having or developing diabetes.

It seems that missing out on deep sleep may lead to type 2 diabetes by changing the way the body processes glucose, the high-energy carbohydrate that cells use for fuel.

5. Sleep increases your sex drive

Men and women who don't get enough quality sleep have lower libidos and less of an interest in having sex, research shows.

Men who suffer from sleep apnoea – a disorder in which breathing difficulties lead to interrupted sleep – also tend to have lower testosterone levels, which can lower libido.

6. Sleep wards off heart disease

Long-standing sleep deprivation seems to be associated with increased heart rate, an increase in blood pressure and higher levels of certain chemicals linked with inflammation, which may put extra strain on your heart.

7. Sleep increases your fertility

Difficulty conceiving a baby has been claimed as one of the effects of sleep deprivation – in both men and women. Apparently, regular sleep disruptions can impair fertility by reducing the secretion of reproductive hormones.

How to catch up on lost sleep

If you don't get enough sleep, there's only one way to compensate – getting more sleep.

It won't happen with a single early night. If you've had months of restricted sleep, you'll have built up a significant sleep debt, so expect recovery to take several weeks.

Starting on a weekend, try to tack on an extra hour or two of sleep a night. The way to do this is to go to bed when you're tired, and allow your body to wake you in the morning (no alarm clocks allowed!).

Expect to sleep for upwards of 10 hours a night, at first. After a while, the amount of time you sleep will gradually decrease to a normal level.

Don't rely on caffeine or energy drinks as a short term pick-me-up. They may boost your energy and concentration temporarily, but can disrupt your sleep patterns even further in the long term.

10 medical reasons for feeling tired

Any serious illness, especially painful ones, can make you tired. But some quite minor illnesses can also leave you feeling washed out. Here are 10 health conditions that are known to cause fatigue.

Sick or tired?

If you're getting your eight hours of sleep a night but still feel exhausted, it's time to see a doctor.

It's also worth seeking medical advice if you have any of these symptoms:

confusion

dizziness

blurred vision

unexplained weight loss or gain

swelling

constipation

insomnia

depression

headaches

1. Coeliac disease

Is a type of food intolerance where your body reacts badly when you eat gluten, a substance found in bread, cakes and cereals. There are 250,000 diagnosed cases in the UK, but research suggests that up to 90% of sufferers don't know they have it. Other symptoms of coeliac disease, apart from tiredness, are diarrhoea, anaemia and weight loss. Your DOCTOR can check if you have coeliac disease through a blood test.

2. Anaemia

One of the most common medical reasons for feeling constantly run down is iron deficiency anaemia. It affects around one in 20 men and post-menopausal women, but may be even more common in women who are still having periods.

Typically, you'll feel you can't be bothered to do anything, your muscles will feel heavy and you'll get tired very quickly. Women with heavy periods and pregnant women are especially prone to anaemia.

3. Chronic fatigue syndrome

Chronic fatigue syndrome (also called myalgic encephalomyelitis or ME) is a severe and disabling tiredness that goes on for at least six months. There are usually other symptoms, such as a sore throat, muscle or joint pain and headache.

4. Sleep apnoea

Sleep apnoea is a condition where your throat narrows or closes during sleep and repeatedly interrupts your breathing. This results in bad snoring and a drop in your blood's oxygen levels. The difficulty in breathing means that you wake up often in the night, and feel exhausted the next day.

It's most common in overweight, middle-aged men. Drinking alcohol and smoking makes it worse.

5. Underactive thyroid

An underactive thyroid gland means that you have too little thyroid hormone (thyroxine) in your body. This makes you feel tired. You're also likely to put on weight and have aching muscles. It's most common in women, and it happens more often as you get older.

Your DOCTOR can diagnose underactive thyroid by taking a simple blood test.

6. Diabetes

One of the main symptoms of diabetes, a long-term condition caused by too much sugar in the blood, is feeling very tired. The other key symptoms are feeling very thirsty, going to the toilet a lot, and weight loss. Your DOCTOR can diagnose diabetes with a blood test.

Read more about diabetes.

7. Glandular fever

Glandular fever is a common viral infection that causes fatigue along with fever, sore throat and swollen glands. Most cases happen in teenagers and young adults. Usually, glandular fever symptoms clear up within four to six weeks, but the fatigue can linger for several more months.

8. Depression

As well as making you feel very sad, depression can also make you feel drained of energy. And it can stop you dropping off to sleep or cause you to wake up early in the morning, which makes you feel more tired during the day.

9. Restless legs

This is when you get uncomfortable sensations in your legs, which keep you awake at night. You might have an overwhelming urge to keep moving your legs, or a deep ache in your legs, or your legs might jerk spontaneously through the night. Whatever your symptoms, your sleep will be disrupted and of poor quality, so you'll feel very tired through the day.

10. Anxiety

Feeling anxious is sometimes perfectly normal. However, some people have constant, uncontrollable feelings of anxiety, which are so strong that they affect their daily life. Doctors call this generalised anxiety disorder (GAD). It affects around around one in 20 people. As well as feeling worried and irritable, people with GAD often feel tired.

Self-help tips to fight fatigue

Many cases of unexplained tiredness are due to stress, not enough sleep, poor diet and other lifestyle factors. Use these self-help tips to restore your energy levels.

Energy-sustaining snacks

wholegrain cereal with reduced-fat milk

a piece of fruit

salad with grilled chicken

hard-boiled egg or lean ham and mustard sandwich on wholemeal bread
a low-fat yoghurt
wholemeal toast, a fruit bun or slice of malt loaf – each with low-fat spread

Eat often to beat tiredness

A good way to keep up your energy through the day is to eat regular meals and healthy snacks every three to four hours, rather than a large meal less often.

Perk up with exercise

You might feel too tired to exercise, but regular exercise will make you feel less tired in the long run and you'll have more energy. Even a single 15-minute walk can give you an energy boost, and the benefits increase with more frequent physical activity.

Start with a small amount of exercise. Build up your physical activity gradually over weeks and months until you reach the recommended goal of two and a half hours of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, such as cycling or fast walking, every week.

Lose weight to gain energy

If your body is carrying excess weight, it can be exhausting. It also puts extra strain on your heart, which can make you tired. Lose weight and you'll feel much more energetic. Apart from eating healthily, the best way to lose weight is to be more active and do more exercise.

Sleep well

It sounds obvious, but two-thirds of us suffer from sleep problems, and many people don't get the sleep they need to stay alert through the day. The Royal

College of Psychiatrists' advice on getting a good night's sleep is to go to bed and get up in the morning at the same time everyday; avoid naps through the day, and have a hot bath before bed (as hot as you can bear without scalding you) for at least 20 minutes.

Reduce stress to boost energy

Stress uses up a lot of energy. Try to introduce relaxing activities into your day. This could be working out at the gym, or a gentler option such as listening to music, reading or spending time with friends. Whatever relaxes you will improve your energy.

Talking therapy beats fatigue

There's some evidence that talking therapies such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) might help to fight fatigue. See your DOCTOR for a referral for talking treatment or for advice on seeing a therapist.

Cut out caffeine

The Royal College of Psychiatrists recommends that anyone feeling tired should cut out caffeine. It says the best way to do this is to gradually stop having all caffeine drinks (and that includes coffee and tea and cola drinks) over a three-week period. Try to stay off caffeine completely for a month to see if you feel less tired without it.

You may find that stopping caffeine gives you headaches. If this happens, cut down more slowly on the amount of caffeine that you drink.

Drink less alcohol

Although a few glasses of wine in the evening helps you fall asleep, you sleep less deeply after drinking alcohol. The next day you'll be tired even if you sleep a full eight hours.

Cut down on alcohol before bedtime. You'll get a better night's rest and have more energy.

Drink more water for better energy

Sometimes you feel tired simply because you're mildly dehydrated. A glass of water will do the trick, especially after exercise.

8 energy stealers

Not sure what's causing your fatigue? Here are some common energy zappers that may be to blame – and tips on how to overcome them.

Being a couch potato

Sitting in one position for long periods of time can sap your energy, even if you're watching the TV or using the computer. Your body equates the stillness with going to sleep.

Solution: stretch often, get up and walk around away from your desk or sofa. Frequent breaks will keep your body alert.

Poor posture wastes energy

A lot of your energy goes on keeping you upright. Bad posture – such as hunching forwards and slumping in your seat – puts your spine out of alignment. The more out of balance your spine is, the more your muscles have to work in order to compensate.

Solution: whether you're moving, sitting or standing still, try to make sure that your head is lined up over your body – not sticking out in front of it. Aim for your ears to be directly over your shoulders.

Crash dieting makes you tired

While it will boost your energy to lose excess weight, going on a crash diet isn't helpful. Very low calorie diets, especially ones that give you less than 850 calories a day, will make you feel even more tired and can damage your health in other ways.

Solution: lose weight by eating healthily, cutting out junk and sugary foods and reducing your portion size. Aim to lose no more than 2lbs a week.

Cabin fever

It's all too easy to become homebound, especially if you have a young child, you work from home or you've been driven indoors by the cold days and long, dark nights of winter. But lack of light and fresh air is a key cause of tiredness.

Solution: get out for a 10-minute walk at least once during the day or when you're most tired. Even if it's cloudy, you'll be exposed to more natural light than inside and you'll feel more alert. If you simply can't get out the door, a few minutes in a room filled with natural light may also help.

Sugary breakfast cereals

Sugary breakfasts, such as processed cereals, pastries, muffins and toast with sugary spreads, will give you a quick surge of energy as your blood sugar peaks. But your sugar levels will slump just as quickly a couple of hours later. The result? You crash as you run out of energy.

Solution: to get a steady release of energy all morning long, eat a breakfast that's based on unrefined starch. For example, home-made porridge with semi-skimmed milk and a little honey, or wholemeal cereal with fruit sliced over it, or an egg with wholewheat or granary toast. Try to choose breakfast cereals that are wholegrain and low in salt and sugar.

Constant worrying drains energy

If you're fretting about something all day long, your heart rate and blood pressure rise, and your muscles tighten, leading to fatigue and aches.

Solution: set some time aside to concentrate on your worries. Try to think of positive solutions, then put the worries out of your mind. And schedule that dental appointment for first thing in the morning so you don't spend all day fretting about it.

Exercising too much

Regular exercise is good for you, but working out intensively every day may not be good for your energy levels, especially if you're a beginner or trying to get back in shape.

Solution: take a day off between strenuous bouts of exercise. But beware of leaving more than two or three days between sessions or you might fall out of the habit.

Winter days increase fatigue

The shorter days of winter disrupt your sleep/waking cycle leading to fatigue. Less sunlight in winter also means your brain produces more of a hormone called melatonin, which makes you sleepy.

Solution: Get outdoors into natural daylight as much as possible, do some exercise everyday and eat the right foods for energy such as plenty of fruit and veg.

Energy booster myths and facts

Many people believe that detox can boost their energy and that superfoods will help in the fight against fatigue. But is there scientific evidence to back this up?

Detox doesn't boost energy

Detox diets are often touted as energy-boosters, but there's no scientific evidence to support the claim. If you're eating well, there's no need to use these diets.

Supporters of detox claim that our bodies are overloaded with 'toxins' from pollution, smoking, food additives and so on. Detoxing is done through a range of methods, including massage, fasting followed by a strict diet of raw vegetables, fruit and fruit juices, and water; colonic irrigation, and supplements, usually taken over seven to 10 days. Supporters of detox claim that it is a way of getting rid of the toxins.

But there's no scientific evidence to show that our bodies need help to get rid of waste products – this is what our kidneys do – and there's no proof that detox diets work.

So what does work?

Some people say they feel more focused and energetic after a detox diet. But this could just be due to them believing they're doing something good for their bodies.

For the vast majority of people, a healthy, balanced diet based on starchy carbohydrates (wholegrain where possible), with lots of fruits and vegetables, some milk, dairy, meat or other source of lean sources of protein, is a better way to protect your health.

'Superfoods' are a myth

Newspapers, magazines and the internet are full of stories about miracle superfoods. Celery, broccoli, beetroot juice, jam, popcorn, cereals and even the great British cuppa, to name just a few, have all been hyped as superfoods in the past two years.

There is no official definition of a superfood. The EU has banned the use of the word on product packaging unless the claim is backed up by convincing research.

These claims are almost always exaggerated. It's actually incredibly difficult to prove that one particular food is better for our health than all the others we eat. Studies on so-called superfoods tend not to do this.

So what does work?

When it comes to keeping healthy, it's important to eat a variety of foods rather than concentrate on one food in the hope it will work miracles. Eat a balanced diet containing a range of foods to ensure you get the nutrients your body needs. Limit your intake of alcohol and high-fat, high-sugar and salty foods.

Energy drinks have mixed benefits

Many people turn to energy drinks such as Red Bull and Lucozade Energy for a quick boost.

Energy drinks are loaded with sugar and caffeine (sometimes more than twice the caffeine in a can of cola) so they'll certainly give you a temporary energy jolt. But the boost is short-lived and may be accompanied by other problems.

The caffeine in energy drinks can make you feel irritable and restless. It can increase your blood pressure while the sugar can contribute to weight gain, especially if you don't exercise regularly.

So what does work?

Plain water is a better choice than an energy drink. For a quick surge of energy, snack on fruit such as a banana.

Vitamin supplements aren't as good as eating well

Think taking a multivitamin each day will make you feel less tired? Think again.

Most people don't need to take vitamin supplements because they can get all the nutrients that they need from a healthy, balanced diet. Popping pills doesn't offer you the same benefits as eating well.

But as a general rule, it's better to get your vitamins from food rather than tablets.

Evidence suggests that fruit and vegetables are good for us, not just because of the individual vitamins and minerals they contain, but because of their

combination of different nutrients and fibre. So, increasing the amount of fruit and veg you eat will benefit your health more than taking supplements.

So what does work?

Forget the multivitamin packs. Eat a healthy balanced diet instead. That'll give you all the energy you need as well as being good for your overall health.

The energy diet

The best way to eat if you want to banish tiredness is to have a healthy, balanced diet that contains foods from the four main food groups in the right proportions. The four food groups are:

potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy foods

fruit and vegetables

milk and dairy foods

meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

Eat at regular intervals

If you eat at regular times, your body knows when your next meal is coming and learns to manage feelings of hunger and sustain your energy levels. Try to eat three meals a day and limit snacks – especially high-fat ones – between meals.

Breakfast boosts your energy

Breakfast gives you the energy you need to face the day. Despite this, up to one third of us regularly skip breakfast, according to the British Dietetic Association.

Go for healthier options, such as porridge with fruit; vegetable omelette or wholemeal toast with a scraping of low-fat spread or jam.

If you can't face eating as soon as you get up, take a high-fibre snack to eat on the run, rather than snacking on high-sugar or high-fat foods.

Here are five healthy breakfasts.

Aim for 5 a day for more vitality

Fruit and vegetables are good sources of vitamins, minerals and fibre, essential nutrients that your body needs in order to work properly. Try to incorporate at least five portions of a variety of fruit and veg into your daily diet. They can be fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or juiced to count.

Slow-burning starches give sustained energy

Starchy foods (also called carbohydrates) such as potatoes, bread, cereals and pasta are an important part of a healthy diet. They're a good source of energy and the main source of a range of nutrients in our diet.

Starchy foods should make up about a third of everything you eat. But there are different types of starch. Where possible, go for slow-burning whole grain or wholemeal varieties, as they provide energy gradually.

Sugar steals your stamina

Cutting out all sugar is virtually impossible. There are natural sugars in lots of foods, including fruit and veg, and you don't need to avoid these. But it's a good idea to cut down on foods with lots of added sugar, such as sweets, cakes, biscuits, non-diet fizzy drinks and chocolates.

Iron-rich foods prevent fatigue

Two out of five (42%) teenagers and one in three (33%) of 19-24 year olds have low iron stores, according to the National Diet and Nutrition Survey in the UK. Being low on iron can make you feel tired and faint and look pale.

While red meats, green vegetables and fortified foods such as breakfast cereals are good sources of iron, the important thing is to eat a range of foods to get enough iron.

Here's some advice specifically for teen girls on how to get enough iron in the diet.

Soft drinks boost zest levels

Watch your intake of alcohol. It can dehydrate you, which will make you feel tired. Make sure you stay hydrated in general by drinking six to eight glasses of fluid a day, preferably water, milk or fruit juice.

Eat enough to pack a punch

Make sure you eat the right amount for your activity level. The average man needs around 2,500 calories a day, and the average woman needs 2,000 calories. But remember, we all overestimate how active we are.

10 tips to beat insomnia

Simple lifestyle changes can make a world of difference to your quality of sleep. Following these 10 tips from The Sleep Council will help you have a more restful night.

1. Keep regular hours

Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time every day will programme your body to sleep better. Choose a time when you're most likely to feel sleepy.

2. Create a restful sleeping environment

Your bedroom should be kept for rest and sleep. Keep it as quiet and dark as possible. It should be neither too hot nor too cold. Temperature, lighting and noise should be controlled so that the bedroom environment helps you to fall (and stay) asleep.

3. Make sure that your bed is comfortable

It's difficult to get restful sleep on a mattress that's too soft or too hard, or a bed that's too small or old. If you have a pet that sleeps in the room with you, consider moving it somewhere else if it often makes noise in the night.

4. Exercise regularly

Moderate exercise on a regular basis, such as swimming or walking, can help to relieve some of the tension built up over the day. But don't do vigorous exercise too close to bedtime as it may keep you awake.

5. Less caffeine

Cut down on stimulants such as caffeine in tea or coffee, especially in the evening. They interfere with the process of falling asleep, and they prevent deep sleep. The effects of caffeine can last a long time (up to 24 hours) so the chances of it affecting sleep are significant. Have a warm, milky drink or herbal tea instead.

6. Don't over-indulge

Too much food or alcohol, especially late at night, can interrupt your sleep patterns. Alcohol may help you to fall asleep initially, but it will disrupt your sleep later on in the night.

7. Don't smoke

It's bad for sleep. Smokers take longer to fall asleep, they wake up more frequently, and they often have a more disrupted sleep.

8. Try to relax before going to bed

Have a warm bath, listen to quiet music or do some gentle yoga to relax the mind and body. Your doctor may be able to recommend a helpful relaxation CD.

9. Write away your worries

Deal with worries or a heavy workload by making lists of things to be tackled the next day. If you tend to lie in bed thinking about tomorrow's tasks, set aside time before bedtime to review the day and make plans for the next day. The goal is to avoid doing these things when you're in bed, trying to sleep.

10. Don't worry in bed

If you can't sleep, don't lie there worrying about it. Get up and do something you find relaxing until you feel sleepy again, then return to bed.

Wipe out winter tiredness

Do you find it harder to roll out of bed every morning when the temperature drops and the mornings are darker? If so, you're not alone. Many people feel tired and sluggish during winter. Here are six energy-giving solutions.

What is winter tiredness?

If you find yourself longing for your warm, cozy bed more than usual during winter, blame the lack of sunlight.

As the days become shorter, your sleep and waking cycles become disrupted, leading to fatigue. Less sunlight means that your brain produces more of a hormone called melatonin, which makes you sleepy.

Because the release of this sleep hormone is linked to light and dark, when the sun sets earlier your body also wants to go to bed earlier – hence you may feel sleepy in the early evening.

While it's normal for all of us to slow down generally over winter, sometimes lethargy can be a sign of more serious winter depression. This health condition, known medically as seasonal affective disorder, affects around one in 15 of us but can be treated. Read more about how to recognise winter depression. If your tiredness is severe and year-round, you could have chronic fatigue syndrome.

Fight fatigue with vitamin D

The wane in sunshine over the winter months can mean you don't get enough vitamin D, and that can make you feel tired.

The main source of vitamin D is sunlight.

Good food sources of vitamin D are oily fish (for example salmon, mackerel and sardines), eggs and meat. Vitamin D is also added to all margarine, and to some breakfast cereals, soya products, dairy products and low-fat spreads.

Even with a healthy, balanced diet it's possible to become vitamin D deficient. The government recommends that people at risk of vitamin D deficiency – including everyone 65 or over – should take a daily supplement.

Get a good night's sleep

When winter hits it's tempting to go into hibernation mode, but that sleepy feeling you get in winter doesn't mean you should snooze for longer. In fact if you do, chances are you'll feel even more sluggish during the day.

We don't technically need any more sleep in winter than in summer. Aim for about eight hours of shuteye a night and try to stick to a reliable sleep schedule. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. And make sure your bedroom is conducive to sleep – clear the clutter, have comfortable and warm bedlinen and turn off the TV.

Learn to relax

Feeling time-squeezed to get everything done in the shorter daylight hours? It may be contributing to your tiredness. Stress has been shown to make you feel fatigued.

There's no quick-fire cure for stress but there are some simple things you can do to alleviate it. So, if you feel under pressure for any reason, calm down with meditation, yoga, exercise and breathing exercises.

Desk stretches

Link your hands, push your arms out in front of you and then raise them above your head.

Lift your shoulders up towards your ears and gently roll them backwards.

Extend your legs in front of you and point and flex your toes.

Hug your knees, one at a time, towards your chest.

Before you reach for the chocolate bar or packet of crisps, try these energy boosters instead.

Mid-afternoon snacks

The energy boost of a sugary snack wears off quickly. Instead, have fresh fruit, dried fruit or nuts, which are a healthy and long-lasting source of energy. If you must have chocolate, choose a few squares of good-quality plain chocolate. It contains less sugar and the richness means that you need less to feel satisfied.

Stretches

Hunching over a computer all day can leave you tired and aching. Make sure you're sitting correctly at your desk. Take regular breaks, at least once an hour: get up, move around and stretch your legs. A few deep breaths and stretches will boost your circulation and help to wake you up.

Drink water

If you don't drink enough water you'll feel sleepy, be less able to concentrate, and you may get headaches. When you feel hungry you're often actually thirsty. Don't wait to feel thirsty to have a drink. Keep a filled bottle of water on your desk, so that you're more likely to drink regularly, and can see if you're drinking enough. For more information, read about diet and fluids.

Changing work focus

When your work pile seems endless, it can be easy to lose enthusiasm and slip into an energy slump. Breaking your "to do" list into small, manageable tasks and taking a short break after each one will help you stay focused. Leave the simple jobs for early afternoon so that you don't have to concentrate too hard.