

Fatigue in Parkinson's disease

PD and Movement Disorders Alliance

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“For this is the great error of our day in the treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the soul from the body.”

Plato

“I am a 74 year old man. I have had PD 3 years. I can live with PD (not great, but livable). But the fatigue is unbearable. As all my life I was full of superman energy, now I’m only good for about an hour or so at a time, and between the lightheaded and the fatigue I’m wasted. I take 1 ½ pills of C/L TID. I take 200 mg provigil and a bunch of pills like NADH. I exercise as best I can and follow eating rules. I’ve been told to go see a shrink and start on anti-depressants. I don’t think I am depressed. I’m retired. No wife or things to stress me out. I’ve been told fatigue is one of the three major problems of having PD. Most of the time I’ am horizontal. I was told you gave a talk on this problem.....”

My husband of almost 40 years, James, has Parkinson's disease, and fatigue is his most severe and debilitating symptom. At first I thought I he had depression. I attempted to get him interested in the things that we so loved to do, but it seemed that he lost his zeal for life. When I asked him about it, he told me that he was extremely tired and it almost hurt to try to get up out of bed or his chair. I started researching all I could on Parkinson's and fatigue, but there was very little information. I felt lost and unbelievably helpless. We went from being participants to spectators in life. With James' fatigue, we have had to alter our lifestyle to conform to his level of energy. We go to baseball games instead of fly-fishing. We cruise on the local Southern Bell riverboat instead of racing sail boats. We go to the beach and watch the ocean instead of teaching scuba diving.

Fatigue was the first Parkinson's symptom I noticed; it is still my most debilitating one. Feeling fatigued is different from feeling sleepy, depressed or apathetic. As an anthropologist who has worked in West Africa, I am reminded of the fatigue I suffered after coming down with malaria. When fighting malaria, I faced an overwhelming need to lie down. But unlike fatigue from malaria, Parkinson's fatigue doesn't go away after taking a few malaria pills. Finding treatment for Parkinson's fatigue can be a huge challenge

What is fatigue?

- A sense of “tiredness,” lacking in energy.
- However, there are different types of fatigue.
- Fatigue may be normal or abnormal
- “Tiredness” may mean without energy or sleepy. They are different.

Fatigue is common (1)

- 5-10% of all visits to primary care practitioners are related to fatigue
- 5-45% of the general population report fatigue
- In primary care, almost 20% is due to depression and 70% unexplained;

Fatigue is a common problem (2)

- It is one of the leading causes for visits to PCP
- In Rhode Island half the PD patients listed fatigue as one of their three worst problems
- In R.I. 1/3 of patients listed fatigue as their single worst PD problem

Types of fatigue

- Fatigueability is different than fatigue
- Objective fatigue
- Subjective fatigue
 - Physical
 - Mental
 - Emotional

Pathological fatigue/fatigueability

- Fatigue w/o prior activity
- Unexpectedly severe fatigue for degree of effort

Causes of pathological fatigue

- Psychiatric disorders
- Radiation therapy
- Anemia
- Most illnesses
- Pain
- Asthma
- Congestive heart failure
- Medications

Pathophysiology of fatigue

- Unknown except for anemia
- Most likely related to release of chemicals
- No known distinctions between fatigue associated with one disorder vs another
- Relationship between fatigue and apathy/motivation

Fatigue and apathy, depression, demoralization

- Anhedonia- reduced ability to feel pleasure
- Motivation
- Planning

Treating fatigue in PD

- Treat all other potential contributors, such as depression, heart failure, anemia, medications; etc
- Slowly increase exercise to increase endurance; set reasonable goals
- Add antidepressants?
- Add stimulants?
- Add dopamine agonists?