

Fatigue is more than ordinary exhaustion



SURGEON'S CORNER DR MOSES GALUKANDE

She told herself she just needed a weekend of rest. She never took it. Fatigue is one of the most common complaints in clinics. Almost everyone feels tired at some point. But there is a difference between being tired and being medically fatigued.

Ordinary tiredness improves with rest. Medical fatigue does not. Fatigue is not laziness. It is not weakness. It is not "getting old." It is a signal. And sometimes, it is the body whispering before it begins to shout.

THE NUMBERS

One in five adults experience fatigue that lasts more than 6 months without having underlying medical condition. And the other 4 in 5 have a clear medical issue that needs diagnosis and intervention.

WHAT EXACTLY IS FATIGUE?

Fatigue is a persistent lack of energy that: Does not improve with rest, interferes with daily activities and ability to focus, feels disproportionate to effort

It may come with bodily symptoms like shortness of breath, dizziness. Headaches, mood changes and poor concentration. The symptoms should be interpreted.

COMMON CAUSES

■ **Anaemia:** Low blood levels especially common in women due to heavy menstrual bleeding, fibroids, poor nutrition, or chronic disease. Anaemia makes your body work harder to deliver oxygen.



A woman rubs her temple in exhaustion. Experts say exhaustion should never be ignored as it could point to other underlying conditions

■ **Diabetes:** High blood sugar can leave you constantly drained, even if you are eating well.

■ **Thyroid problems:** An underactive thyroid slows the body's engine

■ **Chronic Infections:** Tuberculosis.

HIV. Hepatitis. Persistent urinary infections. Poorly treated malaria.

■ **Depression:** Mental health and physical energy are deeply connected. Depression does not always look like sadness. Sometimes it looks like exhaustion

■ **Cancer:** It can be an early sign, especially if accompanied by

weight loss, and unexplained persistent pain

HOW THE PAIN MANIFESTS

By the time symptoms become dramatic, the condition may be advanced. In Uganda, many patients present late not because disease began suddenly, but because early whispers were ignored.

Seek medical review if fatigue:

- Lasts more than 2-3 weeks
- Does not respond to having enough sleep
- Is worsening
- Comes with weight loss
- Is associated with bleeding (in stool, urine, or heavy periods)
- Comes with fever or night sweats
- Is accompanied by swelling, chest pain, or breathlessness

A simple blood test can rule out many serious causes.

THE COST OF IGNORING FATIGUE

Illness untreated is more expensive than early testing.

A delayed diagnosis can mean:

- Hospital admission
- Surgery
- Long-term medication
- Lost income
- School disruption for children
- People who are fatigued for prolonged periods have a higher risk of early death than the general population, as well as a higher risk for anxiety and depression
- The effects of fatigue which may result in headaches, bodily pains, low mood, irritability spill over to relationships, when one person in a marriage is sleep deprived, there is more conflict in that couple.

Sarah is in her mid-40s. She works for a busy company in town. She wakes up before sunrise, prepares her children for school, manages some critical household chores before she leaves the house, balances credit customers before she leaves office, and often gets home late save for the weekends.

When she began feeling drained all the time, she blamed it on stress. But then something changed. She was tired even after sleeping. Climbing a few steps felt like lifting a bag of cement. She began losing weight without trying. Her heart sometimes raced.