

The Fatigue Factor

Totally exhausted and tired all the time now that you're pregnant? Find out why and how to feel better.

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For most of your life, you've taken the lead with your body. You've decided when to eat, as well as what to eat. You've decided when to nap and when to exercise. Now suddenly, your body is taking over. It's telling you that it's hungry. Your body is also very tired. It doesn't matter that you've never gone to bed before midnight.

You may be tempted to try a mind over matter approach, willing your stomach to be quiet and your legs to keep going. But right now, your body is performing an amazing feat – the creation of life. That's no small task for you or your body. Of course, you're tired. It takes a lot of energy to grow a baby.

When Tiredness Takes Over

Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of pregnancy. Early in the pregnancy, fatigue is caused by physiological changes that your body undergoes to sustain the tiny little life inside you, says Dr Sivahami Saraswathi Sivananthan, specialist in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Raffles Women's Centre. Your body is working hard to produce almost double the blood volume in order to carry essential nutrients to your baby. Therefore your heart is working harder to pump this extra blood around your body and your kidneys are on over drive to remove the waste products. There is also a sharp increase in the hormones in your body. Blood pressure and blood sugar levels drop during pregnancy contributing further to pregnancy fatigue, explain Dr Sivahami.

Later in the pregnancy tiredness is caused by the extra weight you are carrying. Due to your baby bump you may find it difficult to get into a comfortable sleeping position.

As your bump increases in size the pressure on your bladder will result in frequent urination even at night which will disturb your sleep.

Keep Your Energy Levels Up

To keep you going and your energy levels up, Dr Sivahami shares some tips on what helps.

Rest

It's probably easier said than done but do listen to your body. If you are tired try and get as much rest as possible. Try to make it a point to get more sleep – go to bed early or wake up later or both! Cutting down on consuming fluids before bed can minimise the night time visits to the loo. Do ask for help from family or friends to get through your daily chores and care for your other children.

Eat well

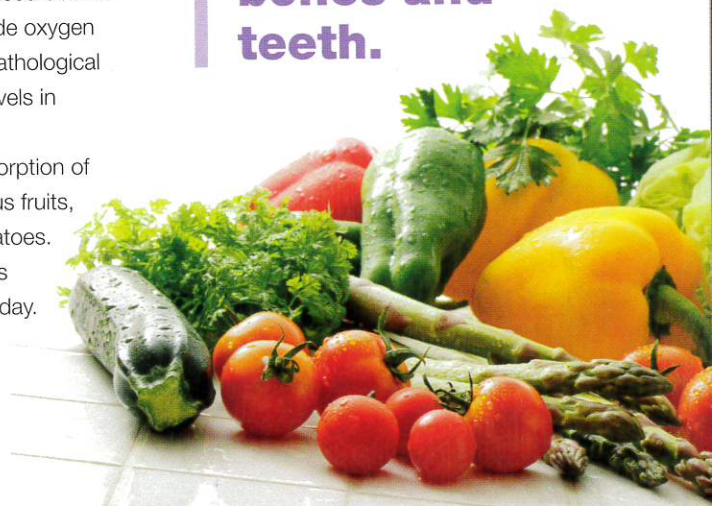
Having a good diet in pregnancy is paramount. The following food groups each have their roles in providing adequate nutrition in pregnancy and in combating your tiredness. Iron-rich foods, such as spinach, red meat, eggs and sardines are important. Iron is used by your body to make red blood cells that carry oxygen to your organs. In pregnancy you need double the amount of iron to provide oxygen to your baby. Quite often pathological fatigue is due to low iron levels in pregnancy.

Vitamin C aids the absorption of iron. It can be found in citrus fruits, green vegetables and tomatoes. Ensure you eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day.

Fibre rich food such as cereals, wholegrain pasta, brown bread and brown rice provide sustained slow release of energy.

Protein can be found in meat, poultry, eggs, beans, nuts and seeds. These help keep your energy levels up.

Calcium and vitamin D which is found in dairy products are not only an important energy source but also serve to help build your baby's bones and teeth.



Eating often (six meals a day) aids in keeping your blood sugar level healthy and will help keep your tiredness at bay. Keep yourself well hydrated by drinking at least one litre of water per day.

Moderate exercise

Exercise can help combat that fatigue. The fitter you are the better you will cope with labour and delivery and the strains of early motherhood.

Feeling the Strain

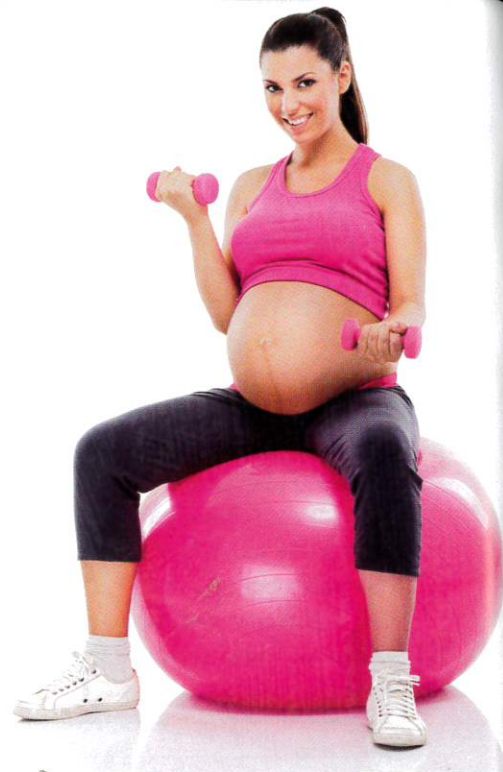
How early in the pregnancy does a pregnant woman usually feel the strain? Well, it depends on the individual but most pregnant women may complain of nausea, poor appetite and possibly vomiting in the early weeks of pregnancy, explains Dr Tan Eng Loy, consultant, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Singapore General Hospital. These symptoms may add up and result in the woman feeling tired. Thankfully, most of these symptoms do settle when the second trimester is under way. Many women find the second trimester the most enjoyable phase with some finding it a time where they can approach things with renewed energy. According to Dr Tan, fatigue can however return once again in the third trimester since the growing baby puts more demands on the body. Many women also complain of disturbed sleep in the third trimester – a result of having to get up more often to urinate at night, as well as the physical discomforts such as backache and heartburn caused by the enlarging womb and baby. This lack of sleep contributes further to the fatigue experienced by pregnant women.

Exercising Right

Dr Tan explains that the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (in support of the guidelines of the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists) suggests in a statement on “Exercise and Pregnancy” that:

- ✿ All women should be encouraged to participate in aerobic and strength-conditioning exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle during their pregnancy
- Reasonable goals of aerobic conditioning in pregnancy should be to maintain a good fitness level throughout pregnancy without trying to reach peak fitness level or train for athletic competition
- Women should choose activities that will minimise the risk of loss of balance and foetal trauma
- Women should be advised that adverse pregnancy or neonatal outcomes are not increased for exercising women
- Initiation of pelvic floor exercises in the immediate postpartum period may reduce the risk of future urinary incontinence

It depends on what level of activity you are accustomed to before you got pregnant. In general, stick to low-impact activities such as brisk walking, swimming or yoga, advises Dr Tan. If you are attending a yoga class, do tell your instructor that you are pregnant as not all postures are suitable for pregnant women. You might want to join a class tailored for pregnant women. Not only can you exercise, it is also a good way to socialise as you might also meet other mums-to-be.



When to See the Doctor

Fatigue is a common symptom in pregnancy, explains Dr Sivahami. However, there are many other conditions that can also present with fatigue. These include iron deficiency anaemia, an underactive thyroid, diabetes, sleep apnoea, prolonged infections and prenatal depression. If you feel unusually tired or have other associated symptoms like breathlessness, palpitations, fainting spells, frequent infections, it is advisable to contact your doctor, advises Dr Sivahami.

Some women find that exercise or meditation gives them the ability to listen to their own bodies. Most importantly, you should listen to what your body is telling you and respond to it. The best way to do this is to keep your body as healthy and rested as possible and be mindful of how you respond to it. This will be especially helpful as you near your delivery date and possibly begin experiencing new and different aches and pains. ■



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