

## 5 top tips for managing fatigue at school

Hi, I'm Kate Hayward and I'm an occupational therapist at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in London. As an occupational therapist I help people with a range of disabilities and long-term conditions continue to do the essential activities that are part of everyday life.

Part of my role here at the hospital involves helping people who are struggling with one of the most common symptoms of MS – fatigue.

Fatigue is described as a feeling of extreme tiredness which can be really overwhelming. Often people with MS find that simple tasks and activities (like walking upstairs or cooking dinner) can trigger this feeling of exhaustion.

Research shows that fatigue is really common in young people with MS, so if you're a young person with the condition, it's likely you've experienced this feeling of extreme tiredness at some point. But at a time in your life when you're juggling homework, coursework assignments, revising for exams and seeing friends, how can you manage your fatigue on top of all that?

Fatigue can sometimes get in the way of you doing the things you might want to do, and this can lead to feeling frustrated or low in mood. To help with this, I'm going to talk through a few of my tips for dealing with fatigue when you're at school or college.

### Tip 1 Plan ahead

Planning your time both in and out of school and college is really important, so that you can keep in control of the activities you want to do. Using a timetable can help with this. Allocate set times for doing your homework in short bursts, with rest breaks in between and try to do it in advance so that you don't need to rush at the last minute.

Make sure you allocate times for exercise and fun activities too as this helps to improve your exercise tolerance and mood which has a positive impact on fatigue levels. When you plan ahead think about times and activities where you can save energy so you can do other things later.

For example having a locker at school rather than carrying a heavy bag all day could save energy, which you could use later to go out with friends. And try to get up and go to bed at a regular time (not too late!) as our bodies like routine and need sleep.

### Tip 2 Take time to relax

Taking time regularly throughout the day to relax and rest is really helpful to manage fatigue. This is better than waiting until you are exhausted before you take a break, as by then you may need to rest for a long time. Rest breaks top up your energy levels making it easier to concentrate on your work.

Try to use part of each break and lunchtime to take 10 minutes to switch off and recharge your batteries. If you can, spend some of your break catching up with

friends and then find a quiet area of the school or college that you can use to relax, maybe by listening to some relaxing music or using a breathing technique. There are lots of relaxation apps that you might find helpful.

### **Tip 3** Talk to your teacher

It is important that your teachers understand how fatigue is affecting you so that they can help you keep on top of your studies. Speak to your tutor about MS fatigue and how it affects you and ask them to help share this with the rest of your teachers. Make sure they know if you're having a particularly bad day so they can give you extra breaks if you need them.

Most schools and colleges have disability student advisors or special educational needs coordinators who you can talk to about support you may need to manage your fatigue.

They can make adjustments to help you, for example, allowing you to take rest breaks during lessons or exams, planning your timetable to avoid back-to-back lessons, accessing technology such as voice activated software to reduce the effort of typing and allocating extra time or a scribe in exams if needed.

### **Tip 4** Talk to your friends and family

Managing fatigue can be really hard and you will need the help of your friends and family. They won't always be able to see how fatigue is affecting you, so be open with them, share information on fatigue and try to help them understand so that they can help you as best they can.

For example, if your friend asks you to go to the cinema one evening after school and you know you will be exhausted, won't be able to enjoy it and won't be able to concentrate at school the next day, ask them if you can go at the weekend instead when you will have more energy.

### **Tip 5** Eat healthily and stay hydrated

Eating healthily and keeping hydrated will help you manage your fatigue. It's important to eat regularly, so make sure you eat breakfast, try to eat a healthy lunch while at school and then dinner with plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Try to avoid sugary snacks and energy drinks as although these may give you a short burst of energy you will then have a sudden drop in sugar levels, which can increase fatigue. Drink plenty of water to keep you hydrated and try to avoid caffeinated drinks, especially later in the day.