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Tiredness and fatigue after an ABI

It can be really frustrating when you want to get better and do things when you feel sleepy all the time.

- I'm very tired after my ABI. Why do I feel so sleepy?
- Tiredness and fatigue
- Feeling sleepy and ABI
- Starting back at school
- What can be done to help?
- What teachers should know.

I'm very tired after my ABI. Why do I feel so sleepy?

There can be lots of reasons as to why you feel sleepy after hurting your head. It might help to think about what you were like before hurting your head. Have a think about your old sleep patterns. Have they changed much? Maybe you haven't changed that much, maybe you just need a little bit more sleep now as your brain tries to adjust. Or, maybe your sleep patterns have changed an awful lot and you feel down about it.

Tiredness and fatigue

We feel tired when our body needs to rest. No-one likes feeling tired and when we do feel tired we can't wait to go to bed or stop what we are doing.

Fatigue is extreme tiredness when you aren't getting enough sleep or you aren't listening to your body when it says it needs a rest. Fatigue is when we fight feeling tired and instead of resting, make ourselves stay awake or alert and carry on with what we are doing.

There are times when we need to stay awake or alert, even if we are tired. This should only be for a short while though. If we always fight feeling tired we become fatigued. This is awful because it can affect our sleep patterns and really affect our health. You may have heard people say they feel 'over-tired' or 'too tired to sleep'. This is when the body is so fatigued and tired it can't remember how to sleep!

Tiredness and fatigue can become a real worry and can be a really unpleasant feeling. If it goes on for a long time though, talk to your doctor who may be able to give you something to help you sleep.





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Feeling sleepy and ABI

If you have a busy day, you feel really tired and need more sleep. It is exactly the same for the brain. If your brain has had a busy day trying to adjust to working with an injury, it can get really tired! Your brain needs a longer rest before it can wake up and deal with the next day.

A lot can depend on what part of the brain you hurt. Maybe you had some surgery on the very middle part of the brain (the pituitary gland and hypothalamus) and you have found it hard to sleep since. Maybe you damaged your brain stem and yawn lots! Or maybe you damaged a few parts of the brain and feel tired from all the side effects.

When you were in hospital, you would have been on lots of medicine to help your brain. If you were in intensive care, you may have been on lots more just to keep you in a deep sleep. It can take your body a long time to recover from the medicine. You can feel sleepy for some time after. If you were also given antibiotics for an infection, these can make you feel really sleepy.

When you get out of hospital, your brain has to adjust and also keep the rest of the body working. Your brain is working double time! It also needs time to rest.

The brain needs time to heal just as a broken leg needs time to heal. It can be a long time before you get into a normal sleep routine so don't be too hard on yourself.

Starting back at school

You may find you don't feel so tired when you first come home from hospital or rehabilitation. Although, when you start back at school, you may start to get really sleepy again. This is because the brain has to adjust to going back to school. School can be a very stressful place because there is so much going on. All of that stress can make your brain feel really tired!

Learning can be difficult. When you are tired, you find it hard to pay attention. This can be really upsetting and schoolwork can seem too difficult.

Fatigue can be more of a problem at school. When you felt tired at home you could go for an afternoon nap. At school you are expected to stay awake for the whole time so you can soon start to feel fatigued.





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There are two main types of fatigue:

- **Mental fatigue:** When you can't concentrate on anything
- **Physical fatigue:** Where you have no energy to move around, even walking can be difficult.

Most children with an ABI can be affected by both mental and physical fatigue although not necessarily at the same time. This can affect you in the following ways:

- **Effort:** It seems like everything you do is a really hard.
- **You get tired quickly:** You feel tired much sooner than other people do.
- **Frustration:** You get annoyed easily and maybe your behaviour changes.
- **Headaches:** Headaches come back and you get stressed.
- **Easy things become hard:** Some people may get tired even brushing their teeth,
- **Schoolwork:** School work becomes harder, you can't do the work and seem to get things wrong even though you have tried your very best.
- **Walking:** Walking can become harder and you may start to have problems with ataxia again (feeling wobbly on your legs); maybe you drag your foot.

What can be done to help?

Doctors are still learning about how to treat fatigue. They aren't really sure about what can cause it either. They do know that fatigue affects many people with an ABI.

Over time, the fatigue can get better. It can be a long process though and it may take a few years to establish a normal sleep routine again. Try and be patient. Talk to your friends and family and tell your doctor about how and when you feel fatigued. They will try and help you as much as they can.

Try and keep track of when you feel tired and see if you can take a rest when you do. You may find some things make you more tired than other things. Over time, you may become really familiar with what makes you feel tired and come up with ways to cope.





Schoolwork can continue to be tricky. Ask an understanding teacher, support worker or classroom assistant, friend or family member to explain to your other teachers why you feel tired, and explain that your schoolwork may be different. They should be more understanding once they know how your ABI can affect you.

What teachers should know

It has been shown that making children with an ABI continue to work when they feel fatigued is not a good idea. Teachers and classroom assistants should understand that the child is not being lazy. The brain has actually done all it can for the time being and needs time to rest at least for a short time. Encouraging the child to 'do one more thing' or to get to the end of the chapter can be very counterproductive and bring about an adverse reaction in the child who is at their limit.

