WHAT'S MAKING YOU so tired?

Is it just your busy life - or could something medical be causing your fatigue?

There are all sorts of reasons why you might be struggling to find your get-up-and-go, but getting to the root cause could help you find the right solution

By Karen Ewennett

Low Vitamin D

The clues: you cover up in the sun, and your energy levels are especially low in the winter. “Also, the darker your skin, the more at risk you are of a D-deficiency,” says Dr Riccardo Di Cuffa of Your-doctor.co.uk.

A deficiency also becomes more likely as you age, as your kidneys become less able to convert the vitamin to its active form, calcitriol. Other symptoms include muscle cramps, joint pain, mood changes and weight gain.

THE REMEDY:
Your GP can test your D levels and prescribe a higher-dose supplement than you could buy over the counter.

Menopause

The clues: Your periods have stopped or are changing - a sign that you’re perimenopausal. “You may also be suffering with hot, sweaty, restless nights and this could be what is leaving you tired during the day,” says Dr Louise Newson, a menopause specialist at the Spire Parkway Hospital in Solihull.

“But even if your sleep is not affected, lower levels of oestrogen and sometimes testosterone can affect your energy levels.”

THE REMEDY:
“I recommend HRT but you need to speak to your doctor about whether it’s right for you,” says Dr Newson. “But you also need to eat healthily and take enough exercise. Without treatment, symptoms such as fatigue can last for decades for some women - so make sure you see your doctor for advice.”
Anaemia

The clues: As well as feeling tired all the time, you may be pale and short of breath. “Your tiredness is caused by a low level of red blood cells, which means you’re not getting enough oxygen around your body. You can easily become anaemic when you’re having periods – especially if you lose a lot of blood each month. But, when your periods have stopped, the cause could be much more serious,” says Dr Di Cuffa. “Gastric bleeding due to an ulcer, kidney disease or bone marrow problems can all affect your iron levels – or it could just be due to an inadequate diet.”

THE REMEDY:
If a blood test confirms you’re anaemic your doctor will try to establish the cause and will prescribe you iron supplements. Look after yourself by making sure your diet is full of iron-rich foods such as meat, fish, eggs, pulses and greens that could help boost iron levels.

Underactive thyroid

The clues: Weight gain, dry hair and skin. A tell-tale sign is if you’re losing the outer edge of your eyebrow. “Some medicines can attack your thyroid and cause it to become underactive – notably lithium, for psychiatric disorders, and the heart drug amiodarone, which is used to treat arrhythmias,” says Dr Di Cuffa.

THE REMEDY:
Your GP will test your thyroid levels and if low, you’ll be prescribed thyroxine to address the balance

Heart disease

The clues: As well as feeling tired, you’re breathless – especially at night – and any exercise is a struggle. “You could also have swollen ankles or legs, particularly by the end of the day, and you may feel depressed and anxious,” says Dr Di Cuffa. “These symptoms – including fatigue – are because your body is struggling to pump oxygen.”

THE REMEDY:
If you smoke, stop; eat healthily, lose weight if you need to, cut down on salt and alcohol and take regular exercise. Ask your GP for advice because you may need medication to help you manage your blood pressure or cholesterol levels. For help losing weight visit www.yours.co.uk/1inch

B12 deficiency

The clues: You’re getting older...
“Age-related gastric atrophy is one of the main causes of B12 deficiency, making you unable to absorb the vitamin from your diet,” says Martyn Hooper, author of What You Need to Know About Pernicious Anaemia and B12 Deficiency (£14.99 Hammersmith Books).

Other common symptoms include a foggy brain and a low mood, mouth ulcers, pins and needles and disturbed vision.

THE REMEDY:
Animal protein has B12 but vegetarians can get it from seaweed products. Injections of B12 can help, too. More at www.pernicious-anaemia-society.org

Isn’t tiredness just a natural part of ageing?

“There’s no reason at all why you should feel any more tired at 60, 70 or 80 than you did at 25 or 30,” says Dr Di Cuffa. “But unless you take steps to keep active (regularly walking uphill and using stairs as often as you can) your muscles will weaken with age and this is a major cause of later-life fatigue.

“Other things that take their toll include smoking, drinking, stress and poor diet. They all impact on the health and length of your telomeres (markers of how well you’re ageing). These can be measured in private tests and some people discover they are biologically much younger than their chronological age, while others are years older. Shortened telomeres are a sign of an inflamed or diseased body and fatigue is a typical symptom. The good news is that improving your lifestyle – with better sleep, less stress and a good diet – can lengthen and improve the health of your telomeres, and could even improve fatigue symptoms within a year.”
Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)

The clues: A fun day out leaves you so depleted, you’re in bed for the rest of the week. It’s not always clear what causes CFS, but a combination of factors – including viral infection – could be involved.” says Dr Di Cuffa.

The REMEDY
Many people with CFS find it helps to eat little and often. Try low-glycaemic foods such as porridge and wholegrains and try to have some protein with each meal. Eat every three- to four- hours to keep your blood sugar and energy levels more stable.” says Dr Di Cuffa. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and graded exercise therapy can also help, so speak to your GP.

Diabetes

The clues: You’re thirstier than usual – and need to wee more frequently. “These are the classic signs of Type 2 Diabetes and show that your body is not properly responding to the insulin you’re producing,” says Dr Di Cuffa.

Research shows that high levels of certain white blood cells can cause fatigue if you have Type 2 Diabetes – but low blood sugar levels could also make you tired.” Other signs include unexplained weight loss and blurred vision.

The REMEDY
Your GP can confirm diabetes with a blood test. “Diet, weight loss and exercise can help improve your blood sugar control and it’s sometimes possible to reverse Type 2 Diabetes if you’re meticulous about your new regime,” says Dr Di Cuffa.

For advice on managing diabetes through diet, call 0247 671 2291 or visit www.diabetes.co.uk.

Stress

The clues: You never stop worrying – about family, friends, money... You may also get panicky feelings and lie awake a lot at night. “These are all signs of burnout,” says Dr David Edwards, a GP with a special interest in stress.

The REMEDY
Talk about it. “It’s important to be able to off-load with friends, or relatives,” says Dr Edwards. “The herbal remedy Rhodiola rosea can help too – it calms feelings of stress and helps combat fatigue. It’s been shown to work both centrally – within your brain – and locally – in the peripheral areas of your body.”

Try Schwabe Vitano tablets (£13.27/30 tablets) from health food shops which are used for the temporary relief of fatigue, exhaustion and mild anxiety.