

6 Signs That You're Exhausted (Not Just Tired)

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If you stifle yawns in 2 p.m. meetings and find yourself passed out cold during the previews on movie nights, you probably already know you're run down. But there's a big difference between being pooped out and being *exhausted* — and the signs aren't as obvious as just feeling tired. It's important to know the difference, because exhaustion can be downright dangerous.

"Sleep is one of the most under-appreciated facets of health," says Dr. Wayne Scott Andersen, MD, medical director of Take Shape for Life. "The consequences of sacrificing it can ripple throughout various areas of your life. Exhaustion has been linked to issues with appetite regulation, heart disease, increased inflammation, and a 50 percent increase in your risk of viral infection." Recent research also found a link between exhausted immune cells — bouts of little sleep can run down your immune system — and IBS symptoms.

So if you're tired *and* you're experiencing any of the symptoms below, it might mean you're exhausted — and it's time to devote some serious time to sleep, ASAP.

6 Clues That You're Totally Exhausted

1. Your lips are dry.

If your lips are cracked, your skin is scaly, and you're suffering from frequent headaches, dehydration may be to blame. Yes, this is a common woe in cold-weather climates. But, if you're feeling drained, you should know it goes hand-in-hand with exhaustion. "You feel more fatigued the more dehydrated you are," says Michael J. Breus, PhD, a board-certified expert in clinical sleep disorders. "If you're constantly craving something to drink or experience dry skin and lips, you might be dealing with a level of hydration that can lead to exhaustion."

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Water affects so many systems within your body that it's impossible to maintain your energy levels if you're not drinking sufficient amounts of H₂O, he explains. "People often forget to hydrate because it just isn't on their minds. Everyone's different, but I always tell people you should drink water to the point where your urine is clear," says Breus.

2. Your mind is all fuzzy.

Your brain needs sleep like a car needs gas; neither runs very well on empty. "Among other things, your body uses sleep to stabilize chemical imbalances, to refresh areas of the brain that control mood and behavior, and to process the memories and knowledge that you gathered throughout the day," says Dr. Andersen.

This is especially important during the 90-minute period known as REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. When it's disturbed, your mind might be sluggish the next day. "You won't retain knowledge very well, as your brain depends on sleep to re-process what you experienced during the day," says Dr. Andersen. Exhaustion can leave you vulnerable to forgetting important things, like a big meeting at work, or feeling especially irritable, says Dr. Andersen.

3. Your workouts have sucked.

Not crushing it at the gym like you usually do? Being exhausted causes every aspect of your life to suffer — including exercise, according to Dr. Andersen. "Exercising requires mental focus as well as physical activity," Andersen says. "If your brain is falling behind because you are not well-rested, your ability to properly challenge your body will be limited — and that's in addition to the many performance consequences that come with poor sleep."

Another big sign: You can't even bring yourself to make it to the gym. "Our bodies are programmed to find the easy way out, which was useful 10,000 years ago when survival was difficult. Today that means one night of lost sleep can lead to weeks of missed workouts and unhealthy meals," says Dr. Andersen. (If it's just a hit of motivation that you're lacking, though, check out these [33 sources of workout motivation](#).)

4. You're super stressed (and trying to ignore it).

It's no surprise that stress can keep you up at night, but the way you deal with it is what might cause exhaustion-inducing insomnia, according to research in the journal *Sleep*. For the study, researchers asked nearly 2,900 men and women about the stress in their lives, including how long it affected them, how severe it was, and how they handled the pressure. A year later, the researchers found that people who coped with stress by distracting themselves, dwelling on the issues, or trying to completely ignore it had higher instances of chronic insomnia, which they characterized as three sleepless nights a week for a month or more. This can turn into a vicious cycle of stress and exhaustion fueling one another. The researchers suggest using mindfulness techniques to ease stress might be a better way to cope.

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5. You're eating more junk than usual.

Find yourself hitting up the office vending machine on the regular? "The more exhausted you are, the more you crave high-fat, high-carbohydrate foods," says Breus. Exhaustion often corresponds with high levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. To decrease cortisol, your brain will often seek out a hit of the neurotransmitter serotonin. "[Serotonin] is a calming hormone. An easy way to access it is by ingesting comfort food full of carbs and fat," says Breus.

Even worse, all that junk food can just wind up making you more exhausted. "With highly processed, highly glycemic foods like soft drinks, candy bars, or bagels, blood sugar and insulin levels will rise dramatically," says Dr. Anderson. "The elevated insulin levels actually cause blood sugar to plummet, so your brain triggers [more] cravings for something full of sugar, fat, and calories." Then, it starts all over again. Instead of reaching for comforting junk,

Dr. Andersen recommends fueling your body with healthy low-glycemic foods like fruits and whole grains that can help stabilize your blood sugar and keep your insulin levels from swinging wildly in either direction.

6. You sleep poorly even once a week.

You probably know that chronic insomnia can trigger exhaustion. But did you know that even a single night of interrupted sleep could screw you up the next day? In a study in the journal *Sleep Medicine*, 61 study participants slept for eight hours for one night. The next night, their rest was interrupted by four phone calls that instructed them to finish a short computer challenge before they could continue sleeping. Researchers found that after a night of fragmented sleep, people experienced worse moods along with weaker attention spans, suggesting that interrupted sleep might be as detrimental as the exhaustion that comes with full-on sleep restriction.

Or, maybe instead of dealing with interrupted sleep, you just go to bed way later than you should. “Bedtime procrastination” is a buzzy term in sleep medicine. In a study in Frontiers in Medicine, researchers discovered that on nights when the 177 participants reported procrastinating their zzz’s, they slept less and with worse quality. Plus, they experienced more intense fatigue the next day. “Set your bedtime and stick to it, counting back seven hours from when you need to wake up to determine the ideal start to your sleep latency period, or falling asleep time,” advises Dr. Andersen. “Decrease stimulation 30 minutes before you plan to sleep by shutting off cell phones, televisions and other devices.” You might even want to try these snazzy orange glasses, too.

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