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BUSY & LIVING PRETTY

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No Energy? 8 Ways to Get from Slow to Go

By Stephanie Schorow, Special to Lifescript

It's 4 p.m. and you've hit the wall. You can't concentrate and your zip is zapped. But hold off on that Snickers fix. Find out what's draining your energy and learn how to put more pep in your step...

You haven't been getting enough sleep lately, but could that be all that's zapping your energy?

Constant weariness may stem from more than a few late-night parties. Some culprits? Disease or heavy bleeding, for example. Or it could be your couch-potato habits and poor diet.

Whatever its cause, ongoing fatigue can leave you vulnerable to infections, according to a Carnegie Mellon University study published in 2009 in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. Of 153 healthy men and women aged 21-55, those who got less than seven hours of sleep were almost three times more likely to catch a cold than those who slept eight hours or more.

But fatigue isn't just triggered by physical causes, says Lilian Cheung, R.D., a Harvard University lecturer and director of health promotion and communication at the Harvard School of Public Health's Department of Nutrition. It's mental too.

Being stressed out or working too hard – even thinking too much – saps energy levels, she says. “The mind needs to rest.”

Sometimes an underlying medical condition – diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, lupus, fibromyalgia – drains your get-up-and-go and you'll need a doctor's help to treat or manage symptoms.

But we can be our own energy-sapping enemies. Here are 8 ways you may be depleting your pep. Plus, learn new ways to get from slow to go:

Energy Zapper #1: A sugar- and fat-filled breakfast

Mom always told you to eat breakfast. But wolfing down a bagel or muffin as you sprint out the door isn't the nutrition she had in mind.



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That carbohydrate-rich meal tastes great, but you'll be crashing in a few hours.

Sugar-and-starch combos boost energy temporarily because of the way our bodies process glucose (sugar), says Stuart Fischer, M.D., founder of the Park Avenue Diet and author of *Dr. Fischer's Little Book of Big Medical Emergencies*.

Eating stimulates the pancreas to release the hormone insulin, which helps glucose enter your cells and gives you an energy burst.

A typical sugar-loaded breakfast puts too much glucose too quickly into the bloodstream. The cells can't absorb it all, so excess glucose is converted to the molecule glycogen, which is stored in the liver and muscle tissue. That's when blood sugar levels drop and you start to drag.

If glucose levels drop too much, "your brain can get a little fuzzy," Cheung says. "Some people have trouble concentrating."

Re-energize: Start the day with whole grains and/or lean protein, which take longer to convert into glucose and can sustain energy levels for longer periods.

Fisher's breakfast Rx? A bowl of oatmeal or two boiled or poached eggs with tomato and lettuce.

Energy Zapper #2: Not exercising

Too tired to work out? Whatever you do, don't skip it. Exercise will put spring back in your step.

People who regularly complained of fatigue increased energy levels by 20% with regular, low-intensity exercise, according to a 2008 University of Georgia study.

You don't have to run marathons either. The study found that those who did low-intensity exercises, such as walking, cut fatigue levels more than those who ran or did high-impact aerobics.

Re-energize: Exercise every day, even for as little as 10 minutes.

If you're in a time crunch, just "take a walk around the hallway," Cheung says.

If possible, work out first thing in the morning, Fischer says. "It can be as stimulating as an espresso [for] waking you up."

If you're drooping after lunch, take a 10- to 20-minute walk. Even just standing up while working instead of sitting in front of a computer helps loosen the body.

"That's why I love the speakerphone," Cheung says. "I don't have to hold it or bend my neck in a way that drains me."

Energy Zapper #3: The bottomless coffee cup



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Heading to the java joint around the corner for your fifth cup of the day? Not only will the caffeine keep you tossing all night, it also does a number on your hormones. Coffee stimulates production of adrenaline and cortisol, two hormones that increase alertness. But that effect doesn't last, so you pour another mugful. Trouble is, after the third cup, the caffeine stops working. "It's like squeezing a sponge," Fischer says. After a while, you only get a few drops.

People who keep chugging cups throughout the day may over-stimulate adrenaline production. That stresses and slows the adrenaline gland, causing hormone depletion, Fischer says.

Re-energize: Cut back – but don't necessarily give up – coffee. One to three cups a day may make you sharper, Cheung says, noting studies have shown that java improves cognitive function in the elderly.

Researchers found that midlife coffee drinkers had a lower risk for dementia and Alzheimer's as they age compared to those drinking little or no coffee, according to a long-term Finnish study published in 2009 in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*.

Check out [9 Caffeine Myths Explained](#).

Energy Zapper #4: Carb-loaded snacks

It's 4 p.m. and you need a wake-up call. A trip to the snack-room vending machine might perk you up, right? Wrong – that's where you get burned.

"A candy bar actually depletes [energy] in the long term," Fischer says.

Remember what happened with your sugar-coated breakfast? Candy, too, provides the boost but it's quickly followed by a slump. So goes for high-energy drinks, such as Red Bull. Energy drinks are particularly bad for overweight people – "like poison," Fischer says.

Obese people are already overproducing insulin from the excess sugars they consume. A candy bar sends another huge jolt of sugar into their systems, he says.

Eventually it leads to insulin resistance, a condition in which the body produces but does not process insulin correctly, and type 2 diabetes.

Watch out for "healthy" juices too, because they're often loaded with sugar, Cheung says. About 12 ounces of orange juice has 10 spoonfuls of sugar – the same as in 12 ounces of cola.

Re-energize: Choose high-fiber or protein snacks, like a slice of turkey wrapped around a carrot stick or celery stalk, Fischer says.

For a refreshing low-sugar sip, drink seltzer water with a splash of juice, Cheung advises. Edamame (green soy beans) are an excellent source of soy and protein – and healthy for women because they contain phyto-estrogen, a plant-based form of the hormone, Fischer says. Microwave them for a quick snack.

Nuts, such as pistachios, raw almonds and walnuts, are another energy-booster.



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"I love nuts," says Keri Glassman, R.D., author of *The O2 Diet*. "They're filled with antioxidants and have fiber, healthy fat and protein."

An added bonus: They keep your ticker healthy. People who ate nuts several times a week reduced their risk of heart attack, sudden cardiac death or cardiovascular disease by 30%-50%, according to three recent studies.

Just don't mindlessly munch handfuls all day because nuts are high in calories. If you're on a diet, practice portion control – an ounce or so a day, Cheung says.

Energy Zapper #5: You're not getting enough magnesium

Nodding off at your desk? Sleepiness and muscle weakness are symptoms of magnesium deficiency.

Many Americans consume less magnesium than the recommended amounts. "The good news is that it's widely available" in a lot of foods, says [Jill Weisenberger](#), R.D., C.D.E, Lifescript's Nutritionist.

The mineral is crucial to keep your body functioning – it plays a role in more than 300 of its biochemical reactions, according to the National Institutes of Health. It maintains muscle and nerve functions, keeps the heart ticking steadily and your immune system strong and promotes bone strength.

Plus, "blood pressure creeps up as we age and diets rich in magnesium help keep it in check," Weisenberger says.

Certain drugs, such as some diuretics (Lasix, Bumex and hydrochlorothiazide) and antibiotics (Gentamicin, tetracycline and Amphotericin), can cause a magnesium deficiency. So can some disorders, such as Crohn's disease, a serious chronic inflammation of the intestines, and poorly controlled diabetes.

Re-energize: Head for the salad bar: Dark-green leafy vegetables, such as spinach, are the best source of magnesium. Same goes for certain fish, like halibut, which has 90 milligrams (mg) in a 3-ounce serving.

"Eat a variety of whole grains, nuts, beans like pintos and kidney beans and dark-green vegetables," Weisenberger says.

Women need 310-320 mg of magnesium a day – more if you're pregnant (350-400 mg) or breastfeeding (310-360 mg). You can take supplements, but first get your doctor's OK.

Energy Zapper #6: Heavy periods

Do you drag during heavy menstrual periods? You could have iron-deficiency anemia, a condition where you don't have enough iron in your blood. The mineral is crucial to making hemoglobin, the protein in red blood cells which carries oxygen throughout the body. Women are particularly susceptible to iron-deficiency anemia because of heavy bleeding, long periods and uterine fibroids. Tiredness is one hallmark; other symptoms include shortness of breath, dizziness and weakness.



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"Anemia from a heavy period produces fatigue that can't be helped by exercise, coffee or anything else," Fischer says. "It's as if the person isn't breathing as much."

Re-energize: Women need 18 mg of iron a day; less (8 mg) if you're 51 and older. See a doctor for a blood test to diagnose anemia. Don't take iron supplements on your own, Fischer warns, because the supplements can cause upset stomach, constipation and other digestive problems.

Plus, it's best to get the mineral from iron-rich foods, including clams, organ meats, eggs, green leafy vegetables, dried beans and legumes.

Energy Zapper #7: Not enough zzz's

It almost goes without saying: If you don't get enough sleep, you'll be tired – and gain weight. Too many late nights spark cravings for sweets and high-carb treats, Fischer says.

Re-energize: Women need at least 7-9 hours of sleep a night. If you're not getting that, take short "power naps" of 10-20 minutes if you can, Glassman says.

Or meditate for 10-15 minutes to clear your mind and refresh your body.

It's like rebooting your brain, just like you do with your computer, says Hawaii-based psychologist Matthew B. James, Ph.D. The goal is to ease your brain temporarily from an active beta wave state to an alpha wave state, the state that precedes sleep. His suggested meditation:

Step 1: Stare out the window or at a pleasant picture and slow down your thoughts.

Step 2: Take long breaths through your nose and out your mouth with a "ha" sound. It doesn't have to take much time. You can meditate anywhere and almost any time, says Cheung, who has written the soon-to-be-published book [*Savor – Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*](#) with Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hahn.

"People think you meditate only on a cushion," she says. "You can be standing in an airport security line."

Energy Zapper #8: Stress

The brain doesn't distinguish between the anxiety of being late for work or being chased by a saber-tooth tiger. Either way, our "fight-or-flight" system releases hormones, including adrenaline, to give us a burst of speed or action.

But unless you're actually running from a huge hungry cat, the hormones build up in your body and eventually wear you out. It may be in your head, but psychological stress can cause physical problems such as lower energy levels, chronic pain, digestive problems and illnesses like heart disease and diabetes.

Re-energize: There's one stress management tool that women carry with them everywhere, Cheung says: Their breath.



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"All they need to do is focus on the breath, following their 'in breath' and their 'out breath,' " Cheung says.

Even simpler? Just smile, she says. This relaxes facial muscles and releases tension.