

Instant Energy

It's the small things—slumping over your computer, reading in dim light, eating full-fat cheese—that wear us down. Read on for quick and easy ways to recharge your batteries.

by Brian Underwood

Even on the best of days, crossing off everything on your to-do list is tough. When you're tired, it's nearly impossible. "Exhaustion makes the smallest of tasks hard to complete," says Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., director of the Annapolis Center for Effective Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia Therapies, in Maryland, and author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic!* (Avery). But a few simple tricks can give you the stamina you need to be more productive. Here, habits that may be draining you—and how to nix them in no time. »»

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Staring at an Electronic Screen

Many of us spend five days a week—or more—in front of a computer, but 78% of us don't have our monitors positioned correctly, which can decrease our energy levels. "When our screens are too high, too low or too far away, words and images can look fuzzy. To see more clearly, we frequently squint, fatiguing facial muscles. We also tend to tilt our heads upward or downward to help put things in focus, a habit that can cause neck and shoulder tension," says Kerry Beebe, an optometrist in Brainerd, Minnesota. Plus, excess glare, looking at a screen for too long or trying to decipher illegible fonts on damaged, dirty or dim monitors and handheld personal digital assistants (PDAs) can lead to eyestrain and headaches.

» FAST FIXES

- The top of your computer monitor should be at eye level so you're looking slightly down at the screen without having to tip your head forward. If the monitor is nonadjustable, place a book or two underneath it, or raise or lower your chair. Keep it at the right distance, too, by positioning it at arm's length.
- "Reduce any undue glare from nearby windows by adjusting the blinds or turning your monitor 90 degrees from the window," suggests Beebe, and give your eyes a rest every 30 minutes by looking at distant objects.
- Increase the size of your font or magnify documents, and make sure your monitor's brightness level is as high as possible. When text is in a light color, switch it to something darker; if it's already black, make it bold.
- Guard your computer screen from scratches with bubble-free plastic films (\$15, protectcovers.com), or ask the company that makes your PDA about skins and cases, because you'll need one that fits your particular brand's shape. Don't forget to clean your screens—or the outside of their protective covers—regularly with a soft, dry cloth to remove dust. (Spritzing the fabric first with a little all-purpose cleaning solution is okay, but never spray a monitor directly.)

Slouching While Standing or Sitting

If you have poor posture, you're not alone. Approximately 60% of women hunch over—a habit that makes us more exhausted, according to the San Francisco Spine Center. "There are two types of muscles in our spine," explains Desiree Kiehn D'Agostino, a chiropractor in Boston. "Slow-



Up to 78% of us don't have our computer monitors positioned correctly, a problem that can lead to eyestrain, headaches, neck and shoulder tension and fatigue.

Thirty to sixty minutes of natural sunlight every day can perk you up and prevent drowsiness.

twitch muscles burn energy at a snail's pace and can work for a long time without tiring, while fast-twitch muscles run out of steam a lot sooner. When we don't put our shoulders back, we rely on the fast-twitch ones, so we get fatigued more quickly." What's worse, when we don't exercise the slow-twitch muscles enough, they atrophy or shrivel up, making it harder for us to stand or even sit up straight.

» FAST FIXES

- Anytime you're sitting down, place a soft ball between your shoulder blades, and then try holding it against your chair with your back.
- If you seldom realize you're slouching, set a timer for every 15 minutes and when the alarm goes off check your posture.
- Constantly leaning over paperwork? Rest your reading material on an adjustable tabletop easel (like the Hands-Free Book Stand, \$30, target.com) so you can look at it while staying upright.
- Crossing your legs at the knee while sitting tilts your back forward and puts stress on your muscles. So cross them at the ankles.

Not Getting Enough Sun

Our bodies require the right amount of light to feel alert. "The pineal gland in our brain monitors how much sunshine comes into the eyes and regulates our internal clock by it, keeping us awake during the day and asleep at night," says Dr. Teitelbaum. In order to function properly and allow us to feel peppy, the pineal needs to absorb the full spectrum of light, which we typically get from sunlight and which is not produced by most lightbulbs. "So getting a little bit of sunlight every day is good for you," says Dr. Teitelbaum. "Sunshine helps the body suppress melatonin, a sleep hormone that can make you yawn and feel groggy."

» FAST FIXES

- Have lunch in a park or on an outdoor bench as often as time and weather permit.
- "You don't need a vacation at the beach. Just 30 to 60 minutes of sunlight a day can improve energy dramatically," says Dr. Teitelbaum.
- If you can't get outdoors during the workday, sit by a window whenever possible.
- Purchase a desk lamp and outfit it with a full-spectrum bulb. To get the most benefit, look for one with a color rendering index (CRI) of 90 to 100 and a color temperature of 5000K or more (\$9 to \$16, fullspectrumsolutions.com).

Worrying Too Much

Ruminating over things not only prevents you from getting quality sleep, it also sets off a surge of stress hormones that initially rev you up but deplete your energy stores in the long run, says Alice D. Domar, Ph.D., executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Waltham, Massachusetts, and coauthor of *Be Happy Without Being Perfect* (Crown).

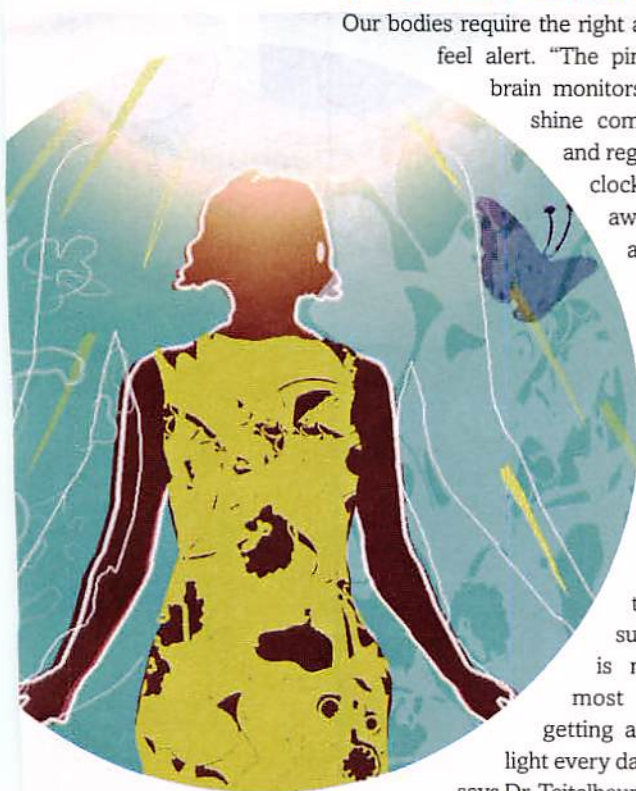
» FAST FIXES

- If it's a single bout of worrying, a brisk walk can lower your stress-hormone levels.
- When frazzled, take 10 deep breaths—in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Calm yourself by sitting still in a chair for 10 minutes. Light a scented candle and listen to soothing classical music with your eyes closed.
- When you're consistently anxious, try Domar's tip: Write down five things that are bothering you, and then address at least one of them. For example, if you've noticed a strange symptom that might indicate a serious health problem, take action by calling your doctor.

Being Dehydrated

The old rule about drinking eight glasses of water a day may seem outdated, but thirstiness can often lead to drowsiness. When our cells perform daily functions, they leave behind waste products and metabolites in the bloodstream that can drag us down, says Eric Plasker, a chiropractor in Marietta, Georgia, and author of *The 100 Year Lifestyle* (Adams Media). "Most of them are washed out when we use the bathroom or sweat. But when we don't drink enough fluids, they can build up, making us feel tired, achy and irritable."

(continued)



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» FAST FIXES

- Fill the largest glass or reusable water bottle (32 ounces is ideal) you own with water and keep it with you during the day, sipping often. When it's empty fill it up one more time, because you should aim to down two a day.
- Cut back on caffeinated beverages like soda, tea and coffee, and also alcohol, because they're diuretics that cancel out the benefits of drinking water and dehydrate you even more. For every caffeinated or alcoholic drink you have, guzzle an extra eight ounces of water.
- If plain H₂O isn't your thing, try flavored water or seltzer.

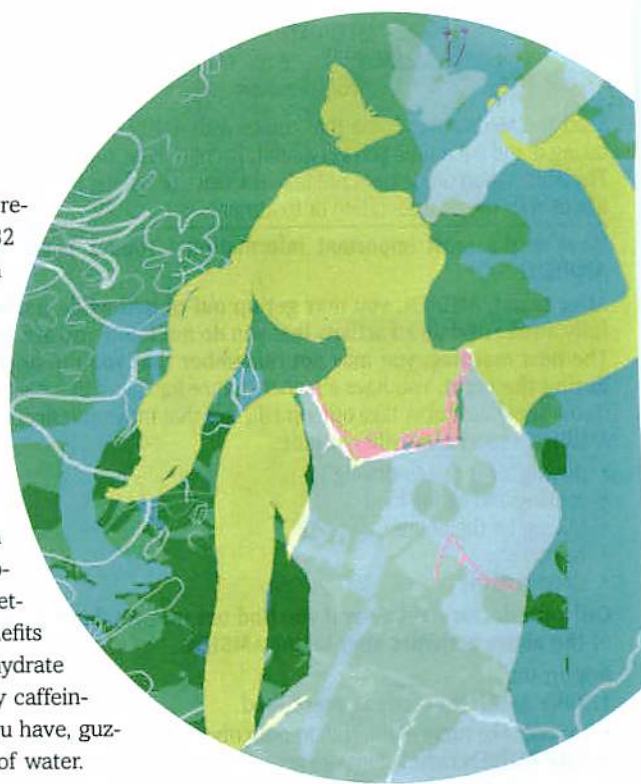
- Mix nonfat milk (it counts as a fluid) into breakfast foods, like oatmeal, scrambled eggs, pancakes or smoothies.

Eating Unhealthy Foods

A few hours after munching on fatty foods, red blood cells clump together and reduce oxygen to the brain by about 20%. "This can make you feel sluggish and disoriented," says Neal Barnard, M.D., president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., that promotes preventive medicine. The sources of the malaise-inducing saturated fat are animal products, like whole milk, full-fat cheese and red meat. Also, consuming sugary foods or refined carbs can cause blood sugar to rapidly rise and fall, often to a level lower than it was before you started eating.

» FAST FIXES

- Replace saturated animal fats with unsaturated plant fats. Choose a veggie burger over a beef patty and hold the cheese; stick to nonfat milk; and cook with olive or canola oil instead of butter.
- Avoid refined carbohydrates that are high in sugar, such as cookies, soda, cakes, doughnuts and candy.
- At every meal consume a plant-based protein to stop the production of serotonin, a hormone that relaxes you so much it can make you feel sleepy. Dr. Barnard suggests eating beans "and all the bean cousins—like chickpeas, lentils, split peas and tofu." Nuts can also do the trick, but only have an ounce or two, as they're high in calories.
- Eat something every three hours or so—even if it's just a light snack—to prevent energy levels from dipping. ●



Chowing down on fatty foods won't just widen your waistline. It can reduce oxygen to the brain by about 20%, making you feel sluggish.