

# What to know about Asthenia (Weakness)

The term asthenia refers to **physical weakness or a lack of energy**. Asthenia can affect specific body parts, or it may affect the entire body.



Asthenia is not a disease, but it is a common **sign of many different acute and chronic medical conditions**. Asthenia can also develop as a side-effect of certain medications.

This article outlines the causes and symptoms of asthenia. It also provides information on how doctors diagnose and treat the causes and underlying conditions that lead to asthenia.

## Causes

Potential causes of asthenia include:

### Underlying health conditions

According to an older article, asthenia is a common symptom of various conditions, including: nutrient imbalances, such as vitamin B-12 deficiency

- sleep problems, such as sleep apnea
- chronic fatigue syndrome
- infections
- blood diseases, such as anemia
- cardiovascular conditions, such as heart disease and stroke
- muscle diseases, such as muscular dystrophy
- neurological conditions, such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease
- metabolic diseases, such as diabetes
- thyroid conditions, such as hypothyroidism
- mental health conditions, such as depression
- cancer Trusted Source
- lung disease
- chronic pain

### Medication side effects

Certain medications can cause side effects, such as weakness and fatigue.

Examples of these medications include:

- antidepressants
- anti-anxiety medications
- medications to control high blood pressure
- statins to control high blood cholesterol
- chemotherapy drugs
- Natural aging
- Aging can also cause sarcopenia, which is the gradual loss of muscle tissue and strength. This overall loss of muscle strength can lead to asthenia or more widespread fatigue.

### Symptoms

Depending on the cause, asthenia may cause regional weakness or full-body weakness.

### Regional weakness

Regional weakness from asthenia occurs in certain body parts, such as the arms or legs. It isn't the same as paralysis, which is the inability to move. A person with regional weakness due to asthenia **may feel like they have to put in a great deal of effort to move.**

The body parts experiencing regional weakness may also display additional symptoms, such as:

- muscle spasms or cramps
- shaking or tremors
- delayed or slowed movement

### **Full-body weakness**

Full-body weakness affects the entire body. A person may also experience extreme tiredness or fatigue. Other possible signs and symptoms of full-body weakness include:

- fever
- flu-like symptoms
- tiredness
- malaise
- difficulty carrying out day-to-day tasks

### **Severe symptoms**

**In rare cases, asthenia could be a sign of a stroke or heart attack.** Both conditions can cause weakness in one or both sides of the body.

Stroke may cause other sudden and severe symptoms, such as:

- difficulty speaking or understanding speech
- disturbed vision in one or both eyes
- difficulty walking
- loss of balance
- lack of coordination
- dizziness
- confusion
- sudden and severe headache
- paralysis of part of the body

A heart attack may also cause **other sudden and severe symptoms**. Examples:

- pain, pressure, or squeezing sensations in the chest
- pain or discomfort in the back, chest, neck, or jaw
- pain in one or both arms
- difficulty breathing
- cold sweats
- nausea
- lightheadedness

**Anyone who experiences symptoms of a stroke or heart attack should phone the emergency services immediately.** Without prompt treatment, these conditions can quickly lead to severe complications or death.

### **Diagnosis**

Doctors may find **diagnosing asthenia challenging** because there are many possible causes.

A doctor will typically ask about a person's symptoms and take a full medical and family history. They will also assess any medications the person is currently taking to determine if they are causing the person's symptoms. If a person experiences localized weakness, a doctor might also carry out a detailed physical examination of the affected body part.

After conducting the initial assessment, the doctor may have a better idea of what is causing the asthenia. They may follow up with one or more diagnostic tests, including:

- blood tests to check for hormonal imbalances or signs of infection
- a urine test to check for signs of infection and disease
- one or more of the following medical imaging tests to check for causes of bone, nerve, or muscle damage within the affected body part:
  - X-rays
  - ultrasound scans
  - magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans
  - computerized tomography (CT) scans

## Treatment

The type of treatment a person receives will depend on the cause of their asthenia.

### Treating acute illness

In some cases, asthenia may disappear following treatment for an acute illness.

For example, asthenia that develops from a bacterial infection should go away after a person completes a course of antibiotics.

### Chronic medical conditions

Sometimes, asthenia may be due to a more chronic medical condition. To treat the asthenia, a doctor will need to diagnose and manage the underlying condition successfully.

Some chronic conditions will require long-term management. For example, people living with multiple sclerosis will receive ongoing rehabilitation, emotional support, and medications to manage the symptoms.

### Medication side effects

Some people may experience asthenia as a side effect of a particular medication. Where possible, a doctor may recommend lowering the dose of the drug or switching to an alternative.

However, a person should never adjust their medication dose or stop taking a medication unless their doctor has told them it is safe to do so.

### Asthenia vs. myasthenia

Asthenia and myasthenia are different conditions that involve weakness in one or more parts of the body. Myasthenia or myasthenia gravis (MG) is an autoimmune disease. In MG, the immune system recurrently attacks a particular part of the body's nerves and muscles. This causes the muscles to become weak and tire easily.

The symptoms of MG tend to worsen when a person is tired and may include:

- double vision
- drooping eyelids
- difficulty making facial expressions
- difficulty talking
- difficulty chewing and swallowing
- difficulty breathing
- weakness in the limbs

Although there is no cure for MG, there are medications that can help to manage the condition.

### Prevention

It is not always possible to prevent asthenia. However, living a healthy lifestyle can reduce the risk of chronic diseases that can cause asthenia. Some steps a person can take to lower their risk of developing asthenia include:

- stopping smoking
- avoiding excessive alcohol consumption
- eating healthfully
- exercising regularly
- losing weight if necessary

- taking steps to reduce stress levels
- getting enough sleep

### **When to see a doctor**

Some cases of asthenia **will pass on their own**. However, people who experience persistent or frequent episodes of asthenia should see a doctor. They may have an underlying medical condition that requires treatment.

A person should **seek emergency medical attention for asthenia symptoms that occur alongside symptoms of heart attack or stroke**.

### **Summary**

Asthenia is a symptom of an underlying condition. As such, it should go away following the successful treatment of the condition causing it. Chronic conditions may require life-long management to keep the symptom at bay.

In cases where asthenia is a side effect of a particular medication, a doctor may recommend lowering the drug dose or switching to an alternative. This should help to eliminate the asthenia.

However, some people may be unable to adjust or change their medication safely. If this is the case, a doctor may prescribe additional medicines alongside their regular medication to help control the asthenia.

Asthenia can sometimes be a symptom of a life-threatening condition, such as a heart attack or stroke. Anyone who experiences asthenia alongside symptoms of either of these conditions should phone the emergency services. Prompt treatment is vital to prevent complications and death.