

Energy Without the Crash

Tiredness in midlife gets blamed on hormones and left there. Three blood numbers explain a large share of it, one of them responds to a cheap tablet, and the exercise that helps most is the gentle kind. Here is the order to work through, with the trials and the thresholds.



1 Before anything else, ask for three numbers

Ferritin, TSH and B12. Not a general check-up, these three by name. Perimenopause is the time when heavy or unpredictable periods quietly drain iron, and tiredness that has a cause on a blood test does not respond to better habits.

Ask for the actual numbers rather than the word normal. Reference ranges are wide, and the trial evidence on iron below used a ferritin cut-off far above the bottom of most laboratory ranges.

2 Iron: the one with a randomized trial behind it

If your ferritin is low and your periods are heavy or were until recently, iron is worth a conversation. Not a guess, not a multivitamin bought on a hunch: a tested number, then a decision.

In a randomized trial in CMAJ of menstruating women who were tired but not anaemic, with ferritin under 50, twelve weeks of iron cut the fatigue score by 47.7 percent against 28.8 percent on placebo, a difference of 18.9 percent. Quality of life, depression and anxiety scores did not change, so it is specifically the tiredness that moved.

3 Move at the easy end, especially when you are exhausted

The instinct is either to push hard or to do nothing. The evidence says go gently and go regularly: a walk, not a class that leaves you flattened. Six weeks is the horizon, and it works in people who are not unwell, just permanently tired.

In a randomized trial of sedentary adults with persistent fatigue, six weeks of low and moderate exercise improved energy about equally, and the effect on fatigue itself depended on intensity, with the low-intensity group doing better. The gains were independent of any change in aerobic fitness, which means you do not have to get fitter to feel less tired.

4 Put protein at breakfast and movement after meals

Coffee and toast is a spike with a crash attached to it, and the crash lands at eleven. Protein first at breakfast, then ten minutes of any movement after the bigger meals, is the pair that flattens the afternoon slump.

Light walking breaks after eating lowered post-meal glucose and insulin in a 2022 meta-analysis, and bodyweight work in a chair did the same in a Diabetes Care trial. Flatter glucose through the afternoon is what the energy change is made of.

5 Use caffeine on a clock, not on a feeling

Caffeine does not create energy, it postpones the recognition of tiredness. Keep the morning cup if you love it, and put a hard stop on the afternoon one, because the evening dose quietly removes the sleep that would have fixed the problem.

In a controlled trial, a moderate dose of caffeine taken six hours before bed still measurably reduced total sleep time. Six hours before an 11pm bedtime is five in the afternoon, which is later than most women assume is safe.



The three numbers, and what each one can and cannot explain

Write the values down rather than accepting normal. Take this table to the appointment if it helps.

Ask for	What it can explain	The catch
Ferritin	Tiredness, breathlessness on stairs, poor concentration, hair shedding, restless legs	A result inside the laboratory range can still be low for you. The iron trial that showed a benefit enrolled women under 50 micrograms per litre.
TSH, with free T4	An underactive thyroid, which can be the whole answer when it is clearly abnormal	A mildly raised TSH is common and treating it rarely fixes tiredness. See the myths below before you accept a prescription for it.
Vitamin B12	Fatigue with pins and needles, numbness, balance trouble, sore tongue	Long-term metformin or acid-reducing medication lowers it. Vegetarians and vegans are at higher risk.

A fortnight that tests whether habits are the problem

Run all four at once for two weeks. If nothing shifts, the answer is medical rather than behavioural, and that is useful information.

- ☐ Protein at breakfast every morning. Eggs, Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, leftovers. Not toast alone, not fruit alone.
- ☐ Ten minutes of movement after your two biggest meals. Any movement, any pace.
- ☐ A twenty-minute easy walk on four days. Easy means you could sing. If you come back needing to lie down, it was too hard.
- ☐ Last caffeine six hours before bed, counted properly, and no caffeine at all after a bad night, because that is the day it does the most damage to the next night.

Go back to the doctor, not to another supplement, if

- ☐ You are breathless climbing stairs you used to manage, or your heart races on standing.
- ☐ The tiredness arrived suddenly, or it is worse in the morning than at night.
- ☐ You snore, stop breathing in your sleep, or wake unrefreshed no matter how long you were in bed. Sleep apnoea becomes more common after menopause.
- ☐ You have pins and needles, numbness or balance problems alongside the tiredness.
- ☐ Two weeks of the plan above changed nothing at all, and your three numbers were never actually measured.

Three stories that waste midlife women's money

You have adrenal fatigue. There is no such condition. A systematic review examined the studies behind the idea and concluded plainly that adrenal fatigue is not substantiated and remains a myth. The tests sold to diagnose it, usually saliva cortisol panels, are not validated for it. Real adrenal insufficiency exists, it is diagnosed with proper endocrine testing, and it is rare. If someone offers you a supplement protocol for adrenal fatigue, you are being sold something.

Your TSH is slightly high, so thyroid treatment will fix the tiredness. In the TRUST trial, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, adults with subclinical hypothyroidism were randomized to levothyroxine or placebo, and the hormone produced no apparent benefit, including on tiredness. The honest limit: that trial was in people aged 65 and over, so it does not settle the question for a woman of 48. It does mean a borderline TSH is not an explanation you should accept quickly, and it is a reason to look at the other two numbers.

If you are this tired, you need to train harder or not at all. Both wrong. In the trial above, six weeks of low-intensity exercise beat moderate intensity for reducing fatigue, and the benefit did not depend on getting fitter. Exhaustion is the argument for the easy walk, not against it.

The rest of it is a book



This is one chapter's worth. Estrogen Left the Chat: Biohacking Menopause does the same across sleep, weight, mood and hormones: what was tested, on whom, the number, and what it means for your Tuesday.

[See the book on Amazon](#)

I am a nutrition specialist, not a physician. This is education, not medical advice or a diagnosis. Do not start iron without a tested ferritin: iron overload is its own illness, and the symptoms of too much overlap with the symptoms of too little.

Sources

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