

“My years vanished

Valerie Szilardy had almost resigned to living in an endless state of brain fog and fatigue—until one simple change restored her vitality

At first, Valerie was thrilled to be heading up a local clothing drive. But her enthusiasm soon vanished as she was overcome by the leaden fatigue that had become a near-constant companion. When asked if she had completed a simple task, Val, propped against a corrugated box, was simply too exhausted to remember. To her chagrin a fellow volunteer (a 75-year-old woman!) picked up the slack. *I wish I could muster even a fraction of her energy*, Val lamented.

“My life took on a zombie-like quality four years ago,” confides Val, a social worker and mother of two grown sons. “I was so sluggish that sleep trumped everything—family, friends, work, fun. When spending time at the home of my significant other, Martin, I fell asleep in the same chair so often that it became known as ‘the sleepy chair.’”

Searching for an answer

“It wasn’t just that I was eternally exhausted. I couldn’t seem to understand the simplest of questions, and if I did, I couldn’t piece together the information required to come up with an answer. As a result my work began to suffer. For years I had taken a great deal of satisfaction in hearing my boss bellow, ‘Good job, Szilardy—you’re always one step ahead!’ But that praise came less and less frequently, and eventually stopped altogether.

“Also unsettling were the fierce migrating pains I was experiencing in

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—Valerie Szilardy, 55, San Francisco



One-minute QUIZ

IS AN ARTIFICIAL SWEETENER TO BLAME FOR YOUR FATIGUE?

If you’re chronically exhausted and experience at least two of the following symptoms, the artificial sweetener aspartame could be to blame.

- Brain fog, yet sometimes having racing thoughts and/or feeling mentally wired
- Headaches/migraines/sensitivity to light
- Depression/anxiety
- Unexplained gradual weight gain or marked rapid weight loss

of tiredness in 48 hours”

my limbs. On top of that, I was suffering from increasingly blurred vision and light-sensitive eyes, which prompted Martin to teasingly call me Gizmo, the creature in the movie *Gremlins* who hated bright lights.

“I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me. I had always eaten a fairly healthy diet and exercised, plus I didn’t drink or smoke. I also made an effort to avoid sugar, using NutraSweet in my tea and eating sugar-free yogurt and other snacks. Still, I felt awful.

“My doctor ordered a variety of blood tests, but they came back negative. I was eventually diagnosed with depression, but I didn’t think the problem was in my head. Not sure what else to do, I attempted to eat even healthier by opting for more prepackaged low-calorie foods. But my energy and health continued to spiral downward.

Energized and alive

“One day while I was visiting with my son and his family, I was so overwhelmed with exhaustion that I opted out of a long-planned day trip. My daughter-in-law suggested that if I felt up to it, I could read any of the books

on her nightstand. The curious title of one, *Skinny Bitch*, by Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, leapt up at me.

“Incredibly, from the moment I started turning the pages on June 10, 2009 (I’ll never forget that date), my life did a total turnaround. A section on food toxins delved into the negative effects of artificial sweeteners, including my preferred sugar substitute, aspartame, or NutraSweet. It seemed all my symptoms were linked to it. I was shocked—I had no reason to think that I had been poisoning myself! I never questioned the safety of something that was available in supermarkets and approved by the FDA.

“I immediately stopped using the sweetener, and just two days later, my symptoms began to disappear. I became a whiz at using healthy sweeteners, and I now sprinkle either Sun Crystals—a low-cal sugar/stevia combo—or a bit of organic turbinado sugar in my tea.

“Today I feel amazing and I have energy to spare. And forget Gizmo—Martin’s new nickname for me is Gusto Girl, from a ’60s beer commercial. And all I did was stop using aspartame!”

—as told to Hallie Potocki

Alert!

ASPARTAME IS LURKING IN ALLERGY MEDS

Up to 67 percent of women notice a spike in allergy symptoms in the fall. That’s because there’s more mold in the air as leaves break down, and spending time indoors raises exposure to dust and pet dander. An antihistamine can ease discomfort, but caution is in order: Aspartame has made its way into chewable OTC allergy drugs. And in addition to raising the risk of fatigue and brain fog, this additive can intensify allergy symptoms. The reason: Some people have an allergic reaction to aspartame, which can cause increased production of symptom-triggering histamines, says Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *Beat Sugar Addiction Now!* (Fair Winds Press, 2010). “Not knowing the source of the trouble, sufferers could keep going back to the medication that’s making them feel worse.” His advice: Choose antihistamines free of artificial sweeteners, and use only when needed.

80% of American women suffer from aspartame overload

Aspartame has been renamed the healthier sounding AminoSweet, but Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., warns, “It’s still made of excitotoxins that damage brain cells and cause neurological symptoms such as poor concentration, migraines and sensitivity to light.”

Aspartame also contains inflammatory compounds that cause fatigue, weight gain, pain, GI troubles and fatty liver disease.

For most women, it takes repeated exposure to aspartame for ill effects to set in. But an estimated 20 percent suffer from symptoms almost instantly. Still, few M.D.s link the symptoms to the sweetener.

SWEET SMART SWAPS

To avoid aspartame, scan labels—it must be in the ingredients list because of its ability to cause seizures in some people. Two aspartame-free picks:

SKIP IT!



Diet Coke

PICK IT!



Zevia Cola

Zevia Cola (\$25 for 24 cans, at amazon.com) is a zero-calorie soda with the herbal sweetener stevia.

SKIP IT!



Eclipse gum

PICK IT!



Spry gum

Spry (\$6 for 100 pieces, at [Vitamin Shoppe.com](http://VitaminShoppe.com)) contains xylitol, a zero-calorie sugar alcohol that doubles as a natural antibacterial.