

Cancer-Related Fatigue

Fatigue can be a significant problem for individuals during, and sometimes after, treatment. This handout helps explain cancer-related fatigue and gives suggestions on how to manage it. If you still have questions, talk to your doctor, nurse, or occupational therapist – they want to help!

What Is Fatigue?

- Fatigue is the feeling of being physically, mentally, and emotionally tired. When you are fatigued, you have less energy to do the things you normally do or things you want to do.
- Cancer-related fatigue is a severe type of fatigue that may be caused by cancer and/or by cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or surgery.
- According to the American Cancer Society, patients describe cancer-related fatigue as feeling weak, listless, drained, or “washed out.” Some may feel too tired to eat, walk to the bathroom, or even use the TV remote. It can be hard to think or move. Rest does not make it go away, and just a little activity can be exhausting. For some people, this kind of fatigue causes more distress than pain, nausea, vomiting, or depression.”
- Roswell patients have described cancer-related fatigue in the following ways:
 - feeling weary, sad, worn-out, slow, exhausted, heaviness in arms and legs, impatient, irritable, and frustrated. They report having trouble concentrating, losing interest in hobbies, and having extreme sleep problems such as insomnia or sleeping all the time.
- Fatigue can be the most distressing side effect and it can severely affect your quality of life.
- You may experience mild, moderate, or severe fatigue while in treatment but feeling fatigued does not mean that your treatment is not working or that your cancer is getting worse.

Goals of Fatigue Management

Your Roswell Park health care team have developed strategies to use your energy effectively and keep regular sleep/rest schedules. The goals of these strategies are to:

- reduce your level of fatigue
- maximize your productivity
- help you maintain important activities in your daily life
- help you adjust to the limits that fatigue puts on your life

Talk with your doctor about whether there are treatments that could help manage your fatigue.

Causes of Fatigue

- Fatigue is a common result of drug therapy, radiation therapy, and blood and/or stem cell or blood product transplant treatments because they destroy healthy cells along with cancer cells.
- Anemia – too few red blood cells to meet the body’s energy needs – also causes fatigue. Anemia can be prevented or decreased by taking iron pills, vitamin B-12, folate, or drugs that stimulate the production of red blood cells. These drugs may increase energy and activity levels. Your doctor will tell you if anemia is the cause of your fatigue and may be helped by taking one of these medications.
- Sleep disruption, stress and not eating or drinking enough also can cause fatigue.
- Pain can also contribute to your fatigue. Talk to your health care professional about ways to manage or reduce your pain.

Manage Fatigue & Get the Most Out of Your Day!

1. Maintain Good Nutrition

Eating a nutritious diet is important in dealing with cancer-related fatigue. Because some side effects of treatment can make getting good nutrition more difficult, try some of these suggestions.

- ✓ Eat well-balanced meals and drink plenty of liquids, particularly water.
- ✓ Try eating many small meals or snacks throughout the day instead of 2 or 3 large meals.
- ✓ Use liquid diet supplements (Boost®, Ensure®) to get extra calories and needed nutrition.
- ✓ For long-lasting energy, choose foods high in complex carbohydrates such as high fiber vegetables and fruits, nuts, beans, and whole grains. Avoid foods high in sugar* such as soda, candy, baked goods (cookies, pastries, etc.), processed foods, fruit juice concentrate, and breakfast cereals. *Check labels for any types of sugar as well as corn syrup, high fructose corn syrups, dextrose, fructose, honey, glucose, sucrose, barley malt, agave, molasses, syrups, and malt powder.
- ✓ Let friends and family prepare meals for you, especially if you are too tired to do so.
- ✓ Try snacking on graham or animal crackers, which are low in fat, and high in carbohydrates.

If you need further assistance with planning meals or getting needed nutrition, please speak with your doctor who may refer you to see one of our Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDN) for a nutritional consultation.

2. Decide What Is Necessary

Since you have less energy now, you must make decisions about what tasks/activities must be done right now/today, what can wait until another day, and what you can ask others to do. Make sure your goals are realistic and you can reach them. and easily reached. This is an easy way to save energy, feel good about yourself, and have some control over your day.

Try to follow some of these tips when deciding which activities are necessary:

- ✓ Put off jobs that do not need to be done every day (making the bed).
- ✓ Be flexible: Your goals might change during the day (You may wake up and want to do the laundry, but find you are a little tired; so, you do the dishes instead).
- ✓ Accept help from others! Let your friend or neighbor go to the store for you.
- ✓ Keep a "wish I could" list near your phone so that when a friend or neighbor calls and asks what they can do, you can tell them! Remember, favors can be repaid later.
- ✓ Do not force yourself to do more than you can manage.
- ✓ Take it slow and pace yourself during activity.

3. Plan Your Day

- ✓ Plan activities for the time of the day when you tend to have more energy. This allows you to enjoy these important activities more fully.
- ✓ Plan rest periods between activities such as bathing, dressing, walking, and doing chores at home.
- ✓ Pace yourself. Not everything has to be done now. Get up, take a shower, rest for 5-10 minutes, and then get dressed. Rest again before making breakfast. You will be surprised at how much energy you can save by resting in between activities!

4. Conserve Your Energy

You can control how and when you use your limited energy. Here are more helpful suggestions.

- ✓ Store frequently used items close and within easy reach to reduce trips to the kitchen and bathroom. For example, in the morning, bring everything you need into the bathroom using a wheeling cart you can push. A cart can also be helpful in moving things in the kitchen.
- ✓ Try easier and shorter versions of activities you enjoy.
- ✓ Sit instead of stand. Make a meal sitting at the table instead of standing at the counter.
- ✓ Try putting legs and feet on a footstool to avoid bending during dressing and bathing.
- ✓ Use proper body mechanics.
 - When sitting, use well supporting chairs
 - Adjust the height you are working at so you don't have to bend over.
 - Bend at hips and knees, not at the waist.
 - When seated, use a cross leg method to wash or dry feet.

5. Plan Regular Exercise

Plan an exercise to do every day despite the fatigue. Studies have shown exercise helps fight fatigue and increases the amount energy we have. Exercise even when you don't feel like it, even if it is only for a few minutes at a time.

Talk with your doctor before beginning any exercise program. When given the OK by your doctor, try some of these suggestions:

- ✓ Aerobic exercise – walking, running, rowing, bicycling, or dancing – is an excellent way to exercise and get energy. If your fatigue is more severe and these activities are impossible, try getting dressed and walking around the house. The important thing is to move about as much as you can, even if it is just a little.
- ✓ Ask your doctor if you need a consult with a physical or occupational therapist to plan an exercise that will increase your energy and endurance.

6. Use Activity

Restorative activities help rest your mind, boost your spirits, and improve your sense of well-being. Activities you enjoy can reduce stress and/or distract you from thinking about how tired you feel.

Stress relieving activities include:

- Yoga
- Meditation
- Exercise
- Massage
- Visual imagery
- Laughing
- Enjoying nature by bird watching or fishing

Distracting activities include:

- Listening to music, playing music, or singing
- Reading a book
- Playing cards
- Playing a board game
- Video games
- Visiting with a friend
- Doing a hobby or making a craft
- Enjoy the company of a pet

7. Rest and Sleep

In addition to getting the most out of your day through good nutrition, doing only what is necessary, exercising, planning, and using restorative activities, you must rest.

The following tips promote good quality rest and sleep:

- ✓ Maintain a regular schedule of nap and sleep times. Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day will help your body get into a routine. This will make falling asleep easier at night.
- ✓ Stay as active as you can during the day, without becoming overly fatigued. Remember your strategies are to plan, do what is necessary, and conserve your energy. Remember that doing nothing will not reduce fatigue. Being active will help with fatigue that is more normal and allow the tiredness you feel at the end of the day to set in. You may fall asleep quicker and sleep better, because you had a more active day.
- ✓ Sleeping with your body in a proper position may improve the quality and quantity of your sleep. Occupational therapists and physical therapists can give you techniques for better positioning while you are sleeping.
- ✓ Taking rest breaks is important, so rest when you need to. Taking a nap is OK if you do not have trouble falling asleep at night. Naps should only be for short periods during the day, no longer than 1 hour.
- ✓ Listening to relaxing music or reading a book before bed may help you to fall asleep. Whatever makes you sleepy and is relaxing is good to do at night before bed, to help yourself to get a good night's sleep.
- ✓ Turn it off! The blue light from TV, computer, and phone screens has been shown to delay the release of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin. This disturbs the body's natural internal clock (circadian rhythm) making it harder to fall asleep and reducing the amount of REM (dreaming) sleep you get.
- ✓ Taking a warm bath or drinking warm milk.
- ✓ Avoid caffeine and other stimulants, especially later in the day. Limiting fluids after 7 pm may also decrease the sleep disruption associated with bathroom needs at night.

Fatigue Facts

- Estimates are that more than half of people who have cancer experience cancer-related fatigue. (Leukemia & Lymphoma Society /LLS)
- Fatigue in cancer patients may have more than one cause. (National Cancer Institute)
- Cancer-related fatigue is the most common and disruptive symptom experienced by cancer survivors. (National Comprehensive Cancer Centers/NCCN)
- Anxiety and depression are the most common psychological causes of fatigue in cancer patients. (National Cancer Institute)
- For people getting IV drug therapy in cycles, fatigue often gets worse in the first few days and then gets better until the next treatment, when the pattern starts again. For those getting radiation, fatigue usually gets worse as the treatment goes on. (American Cancer Society)
- Fatigue during treatment is a risk factor for developing chronic cancer-related fatigue following treatment. (BMC Cancer)
- Fatigue can affect all areas of life by making the patient too tired to take part in daily activities, relationships, social events, and community activities. (National Cancer Institute)
- Up 1 out of every 3 cancer survivors have persistent fatigue for years after cancer diagnosis. (BMC Cancer)