

Guide for Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue

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About cancer-related fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue is not the typical, tired feeling after a busy day. Cancer-related fatigue is more severe. It lasts longer and can get in the way of your daily activities. Talking on the phone, shopping, eating, bathing or even walking may be hard to do when you feel fatigued. It may affect every part of your life.

With everyday fatigue, you might rest and then feel refreshed to start or carry on with your day. With cancer-related fatigue, though, rest or sleep may not help you feel better.

Many patients describe feeling:

- Tired or worn out.
- Weak or weary.
- Exhausted.
- Heavy or slow.

Cancer-related fatigue can also cause many other symptoms, such as:

- Having a hard time thinking and doing daily tasks.
- Having a hard time sleeping.
- Feeling short of breath.
- Feeling leg pain.
- Feeling more irritable, nervous, anxious or impatient.
- Having a hard time walking even short distances.

Causes

Cancer-related fatigue has many causes. It is the most common cancer symptom and treatment side effect. In fact, many patients first see a doctor because of this symptom. One or more of the following can cause fatigue.

Cancer

Cancers of the blood, such as leukemia and lymphoma, can cause fatigue. Solid tumors that have spread to the bone marrow can cause fatigue, too

Cancer treatment

- **Chemotherapy** – Any chemotherapy drug may cause fatigue. It may occur after several weeks of treatment and can last from a few days to until after treatment ends.
- **Radiation treatment** – During radiation, the body uses more energy to repair tissue. Fatigue may worsen over time and last from 3 to 4 weeks after treatment to 2 or 3 months.
- **Surgery** – Most patients feel some fatigue after surgery, but it often gets better with time.
- **Stem cell transplant (bone marrow transplant)** – In the first months after transplant, patients often feel tired. Over time, energy may increase, but patients may never have as much energy as they once did. However, they can still manage their fatigue to feel better.

- **Immunotherapy** – This treatment works with the immune system, which is the body’s way of fighting infection. The treatment may lead to constant fatigue or have side effects that feel like the flu. This includes fever, chills, muscle pain, headache and an overall sense of not feeling well.
- **Combination treatment** – Some patients get more than one kind of treatment. They may have many treatments in a row or two or more treatments at once. Patients who receive combination treatment may have more fatigue.
- **New drug or treatment** – Patients may receive a new cancer treatment if they participate in a clinical trial. When new treatments are being studied, it may be uncertain which side effects, like fatigue, patients will have and for how long.

Other causes of fatigue

Some other causes of fatigue are listed below:

- **Anemia** – Anemia occurs when your red blood cell level becomes low. This affects your body’s ability to move oxygen to the cells. Having less oxygen in the cells makes the body weak. Cancer and its treatment can cause anemia.
- **Nutrition** – Your diet can impact fatigue. It can get worse if you are not eating enough or if you are not eating the right foods. You become fatigued because your body needs more “fuel” to make energy. Even if you eat the right foods, you may become fatigued if your body cannot process food the best way.
- **Sleep disorders and inactivity** – Fatigue may worsen if you do not sleep well. Less sleep at night or too much sleep during the day can create poor sleep habits. Patients who are less active during the day or wake up often at night have worse fatigue.
- **Psychological (mood and depression)** – Anxiety, stress and mood can all cause fatigue. Also, if you become depressed, the fatigue can worsen. It may last longer than usual, even after the physical causes are gone. Fatigue can also lead to feelings of low self-esteem and frustration. This may make you feel helpless.
- **Mental fatigue** – Mental fatigue may make it hard for you to focus, think clearly and make decisions. Constant mental effort and high levels of stress or emotion can cause this.
- **Pain** – Chronic or severe pain can increase fatigue. If you are in pain, you may not rest or sleep well at night.
- **Medicines** – Many medicines can cause fatigue. Some pain medicines cause drowsiness, for example. Other medicines that treat depression, nausea, anxiety and seizures can cause drowsiness or fatigue, too.

Warning signs

It is important that you pay attention to your own personal warning signs of fatigue. These signs might be:

- A weak feeling over the entire body.
- Tired eyes and legs, and stiff shoulders.
- Having a hard time focusing.
- Waking up tired after rest or sleep.
- Lack of energy or less energy.

- Lack of motivation to be physically active.
- Feeling more irritable, nervous, anxious or impatient.

Treatment for fatigue

In the past, doctors told fatigued patients to rest and take it easy. Some doctors probably even told patients that fatigue was just something to live with during cancer treatment. Today, doctors know more about fatigue and the ways to treat it. For some patients, treating fatigue may be as important as treating the cancer. Here are some suggestions and treatment plans for treating fatigue.

Exercise

When people are diagnosed with cancer, their whole world comes to a stop. Everything becomes about treatment and feeling better. The daily routine that you once knew may no longer exist. Instead, you may be going to the doctor, getting treatment or even staying in the hospital.

When you are less active or change your routine, you may feel more tired and have a lack of energy. As you spend more time in bed or sitting in chairs, you may also feel anxious, depressed, weak, fatigued and nauseous. It may be surprising to you, but exercise helps many patients with fatigue. A patient's first response to this suggestion may be, "I'm tired, and you want me to exercise?"

Yes, many studies have shown that people who have cancer and who exercise have:

- More energy.
- Better appetite.
- Improved ability to perform routine physical activities.
- Better quality of life.
- Improved outlook and sense of well-being.

Even during cancer treatment, you may want to exercise. During this time, you may benefit from a rehabilitation program. Talk with your doctor before starting an exercise program. Your doctor may suggest other options if you are unable to exercise.

General exercise guidelines

- Start slowly and allow your body time to adjust.
- Follow a regular exercise schedule. A schedule can help you exercise safely and avoid injury.
- If you have extreme soreness, stiffness, exhaustion or feel short of breath, you are over doing it. It is important to exercise at your own pace.
- Exercise with caution. Have a family member or friend exercise with you.
- Do not exercise in the heat or humidity.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

Here are some suggestions for safe and helpful exercise:

- **Brisk walking** - Walking is an easy and cheap way to exercise. It can also be a great social activity. Start with a slow to moderate pace. Gradually walk for a longer time each week until you can go for 30 to 45 minutes. There are many places to walk safely. For example, you can walk in your home or go to the nearest shopping mall to walk indoors in a well-lit space. Here are some tips:
 - Wear walking shoes.
 - Drink plenty of fluids.
 - Scan the path for uneven surfaces.
 - Use a walking cane to help with your balance.

If you are not used to walking, you may feel soreness the next day. A warm bath may help.

- **Stretching and light weight training** - This is a good way to exercise if you cannot leave the house. A physical therapist, occupational therapist or certified trainer can help you design your own workout plan. Examples of exercises are:
 - Upper arm curls
 - Walking lunges
 - Heel rises
 - Walking up and down stairs
 - Bicycle kicks while lying down

For weight training, use vegetable cans, water bottles and or rubber bands. Some TV networks offer fitness shows that explain how to do these exercises. For example, a local station may broadcast “Sit and Be Fit” in your area or you can watch on the internet.

- **Water aerobics (if allowed by your doctor)** - Water aerobics is a great form of exercise because it causes less stress on your muscles and joints. You do not need to know how to swim. It is often done in waist or chest-high water. The best place for water aerobics is an indoor pool where the water is not too hot or cold. For classes, check with local gyms, the YMCA or community centers. Remember to check with your doctor first if you are currently having cancer treatment. You may need to wait until you have finished treatment before starting a water program.
- **Yoga** - Yoga is a good way to become more flexible and to relax because it focuses on your breathing.
- **Indoor stationary cycling** - With indoor cycling, there are no complex moves or techniques to learn. You are always in control of the bike’s speed and tension. It is non-impact and causes less stress on knees, hips and ankles than many other forms of exercise. To get started, check with your gym for classes.

Eat sensibly

Fatigue can become worse if you are not eating enough or if you are not eating the right foods. Eating a balanced diet can help you feel better and have more energy. Here are some tips to help you manage and maintain good nutrition.

- **Eat the right amount of calories.** If you are unable to eat regular sized meals, eat small meals more often
- **Include protein in your diet.** Fish, lean meats, low-fat yogurt and cheeses, eggs, legumes, beans and peanut butter are good sources of protein.
- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Drink at least 8 (8-ounce) glasses of fluid each day to stay hydrated. Fluids are water, juice, milk, broth, milkshakes, gelatin and other drinks. If you are not able to eat much, choose liquids that are high in calories or protein. Drink milk, juices, smoothies and nutritional supplements.
- **Eat foods rich in vitamins and minerals.** Fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and whole grains are good sources of vitamins and minerals
- **Meet with a dietitian.** A registered dietitian can help you with eating concerns so that you get the nutrients you need. He or she can offer ways for you to increase calories and eat protein in your diet. Ask to meet with a dietitian.

Try one of these easy and well-balanced snack ideas:

- Apple and string cheese.
- Banana and peanut butter.
- Cottage cheese and berries.
- Meat, cheese or peanut butter on bread.
- Fresh or dried fruit and nuts.
- Graham crackers and skim milk.
- Whole grain crackers with cheese.
- Orange smoothie (orange juice and milk).
- Tortilla and beans.
- Yogurt with granola and nuts.

Sleep well

Not getting enough good sleep may contribute to fatigue. If you are less active during the day and wake up often at night, you are more likely to have higher levels of fatigue. A disturbance in your sleep pattern can also add to your fatigue. To help you sleep during the night, you may want to try these tips.

During the day

- Exercise regularly. Even a short walk during the day can help you relax. Do not exercise in the evening. Give yourself at least 2 to 4 hours before bedtime to recover from exercise.
- Limit naps. If you need a nap, keep it to 30 minutes or shorter.

Before bedtime

- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, chocolate and nicotine in the late afternoon and evening. Limit liquids in the evening before going to bed.
- Turn off the TV and other screens (computer, telephone and iPads) one hour before bedtime. Listen to quiet music or take a warm bath.
- If you worry or are not able to “turn off your brain” when you try to sleep, make a list of the things you need to do the next day. This will help you to relax.

At bedtime

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- A bedtime snack of warm milk, turkey or a banana may make you sleepy.
- Use your bedroom for sleep and intimacy only. Do not read, watch TV or work in the bedroom.
- If you are a “clock watcher,” turn the clock around.
- To fall asleep, lie in the position that you normally find yourself in when you wake up.
- Have your partner go to bed with you at the same time.
- If you wake during the night and are not able to fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, go to another room and relax. Read a book (not on a screen) or listen to relaxing music. When you get sleepy, return to bed. Repeat as needed if you wake up many times during the night.

Other helpful tips for bedtime

- Sleep in a dark, cool, quiet, relaxing room.
- Add one extra hour of sleep if you feel ill or feel unable to get up at the scheduled time in the morning.
- Use meditation, massage or relaxation to lower stress.
- Avoid things that are mentally exciting like the TV, computer, books and video games.

Manage stress and relax

Learning about stress management and relaxation can help manage your fatigue. Here are some tips.

- Learn about relaxation techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing.
- Take part in hobbies that require little physical energy. Try knitting, reading, listening to music and scrapbooking.
- Talk to your family and friends and ask for help.
- Cancer support groups can be a great resource for support and understanding. Ask your social worker for a list of support groups in your area.
- If your stress seems out of control or you feel depressed, ask to speak with a counselor or therapist.

Consider medicine

Sometimes, medicines can help with fatigue. They can help improve energy and memory, give a sense of well-being and increase appetite. However, some medicines can also cause sleeplessness, excitement or a “jittery”

feeling and mood changes. Patients taking these kinds of medicines are watched closely for possible reactions and harmful effects. Doses may be changed, if needed.

Save energy

Saving energy during the day may help you have less fatigue. How you stand, walk, move your body and space your work area can affect your energy. Use the tips below to save energy and lower your level of fatigue.

Plan and organize your work.

- Do tasks that require more energy during the time of day when you have the most energy.
- Alternate tasks that take lots of energy with those that take less.
- Every day, plan the activities that you would like to do.
- Ask others to do as much as possible for you.
- Do not do tasks that are not important. Skip steps if possible.
- Combine errands into one trip and simplify details.

Pace yourself.

- Go at a moderate pace. Do not rush.
- Avoid spurts of activity. This can drain energy.
- Create a routine to prevent overdoing it.

Schedule rest.

- Balance activities so you are doing, resting, doing, resting and so on.
- Stop to rest before you get tired.

Move your body safely.

- Sit to do activities when possible.
- Use helpful devices if needed, like walkers, scooters, canes, handrails and grab bars.
- Avoid heavy lifting, such as children, pots, pans and laundry. Bend at the knees and use your leg muscles to lift, not your back. Use carts or wagons to move things from room to room or place to place.
- Limit work that requires you to reach over your head. Store items at waist-level.

Prioritize your activities.

- Make a list to decide which activities are important for you to do. Decide which tasks can be assigned to someone else.
- Focus on things you enjoy doing.

Control your surroundings.

- Avoid temperatures that are very hot or very cold.
- Do not take long, hot showers or baths. This can drain your energy.

Energy-saving tips

Dressing

- Wear loose-fitting clothes.
- Wear clothes that do not have many buttons.
- Use a reacher or dressing stick to help with zippers in back.
- Sit down while you are dressing.
- For women, fasten your bra in front and turn it to the back.
- Wear slip-on shoes or shoes that have Velcro® ties.
- Use a long-handled shoehorn or sock aid.
- Bring your foot to your knee. Do not lean over to put on your socks and shoes.

Bathing and grooming

- Use a chair in the shower or tub.
- Use a long-handled sponge or brush to reach your back and feet.
- Use liquid soap or soap on a rope.
- Use a terrycloth robe instead of towels to dry off.
- Use organizers to keep items within reach.
- Rest your elbows on a dressing table to avoid leaning.
- Use a raised toilet seat.
- Wash your hair in the shower rather than over a sink.
- Use long-handled brushes or combs to avoid holding arms overhead.
- Sit down while blow-drying your hair or grooming.

Housework

- Spread out tasks over the week or month.
- Ask friends or family for help or hire someone to help you.
- Use long-handled dusters, mops and dustpans.
- Walk with the vacuum cleaner instead of pushing it in front of you.

Shopping

- Make a list.
- Organize your list by store aisle.
- Ask for help in the store or use a motorized cart while shopping.
- Have groceries delivered.
- Shop at off-peak times.

Cooking

- Put together all the ingredients before you start.
- Use mixes or pre-packaged foods.
- Put often-used items at chest level to limit bending or reaching.
- Cook in dishes that are also serving pieces.
- Use small, lightweight appliances.
- Use a blender or mixer instead of mixing by hand.
- Buy utensils that fit comfortably in your hand.

- Line ovens and drip pans with foil for easier cleanup.
- Let dishes soak rather than scrubbing them.
- Let dishes air-dry.

Childcare

- Plan activities or outings at a place that will allow sitting or lying down.
- Take advantage of day care programs.
- Teach children to make a game of household chores.

Workplace

- Plan your work around your best times of the day.
- Create work centers so the equipment is within easy reach.
- Make shortcuts.
- Take rest breaks.
- Work half days, if possible.

Leisure

- Plan activities that allow you to sit or lie down.
- Plan social activities for when you have the most energy.

Other

- Install and use ramps.
- Use a lift chair.
- Use cruise control when driving.

Information for caregivers

It is important for caregivers to stay healthy and take care of their own well-being. This is how they can give the best possible care to their loved ones. Caregivers can suffer from fatigue because of the physical and emotional demands placed on them. Much of the information provided in this book can also be used by caregivers.

- Take time for yourself and your needs. Ask family members and friends for help in caring for your loved one. Ask for help with errands or other tasks. People concerned about your loved one's well-being will appreciate being able to help.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids every day.
- Take short walks and exercise daily.
- Get enough sleep, and rest between activities.
- Make time to relax and participate in hobbies that you enjoy. This can help reduce stress.
- Be realistic. Do not try to do too much or overload your daily to-do list.
- Set limits with your loved one. Decide what he or she can do alone.
- Join a support group or share your feelings with family and friends.

