



Cancer
Society

Fatigue is a Common Symptom for People with Cancer: Don't Ignore it

CANCER SOCIETY - BRIEF FACTS

For most people, "fatigue" is a temporary condition - something you feel after you wash the kitchen floor, or mow the lawn, and that goes away if you take a quick nap.

For cancer patients fatigue is a common symptom. Sometimes fatigue can be chronic (meaning it doesn't go away), and can severely affect health and quality of life.

Unfortunately, many cancer patients don't talk to their doctors about fatigue, because they don't understand exactly what it is, or think that feeling tired from cancer or cancer treatment is "normal".

What is Fatigue?

No one would be surprised to think of weakness or exhaustion as signs of fatigue. But there are other, less obvious indicators too. "I just don't feel like myself" is a common statement made by cancer patients, especially if they are undergoing chemotherapy. For example, pain in your legs, or difficulty climbing stairs or walking short distances are all signs of fatigue. Fatigue can mean being short of breath after only light activity, like cooking a meal or taking a shower.

Fatigue can also affect the way you think and feel - it can cause you to have difficulty concentrating, lose interest in your pastimes and make you impatient. If any of these are true, you may be suffering from fatigue as a medical condition.

What Causes Fatigue?

Tiredness and fatigue may be caused by the disease itself or by the treatments. One of the most common causes of fatigue is chemotherapy treatment. Chemotherapy can lower the number of red cells, which carry oxygen throughout your body and give you energy. Having a low number of red blood cells, called anaemia, means that your body gets "out of breath" when you do something mildly strenuous. The cancer itself and nutritional problems can also cause anaemia.

Chemotherapy or general cancer pain can also disrupt your eating or sleeping habits, both of which can result in fatigue. Not eating enough (malnutrition) can also cause fatigue.

Talk to Your Doctor

If you feel fatigue or even think you do, talk to your doctor, nurse or caregiver. Your healthcare team can provide you with helpful information to improve the symptoms of fatigue. Medications may be prescribed to

treat any physical conditions (like anaemia due to chemotherapy) that can be the cause of it.

You should contact your doctor or your community oncology nurse without delay if you experience any of the following conditions in addition to feeling tired.

- **Feeling out of breath.** This usually occurs because the body is not getting enough oxygen out of the air you breathe.
- **A sudden or unexpected change in your level of alertness.** There may be an alternate cause of this change, so ask your doctor.

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- **Falling.** All bad falls should be reported to determine if you have any injury or need any equipment such as a walker or rails, to help you remain safe.
- **Frequent or severe dizziness.** Loss of balance can happen when getting out of bed or going from standing to a sitting position. If this happens more than occasionally it should be reported.

- **Ringing in the ears.** Again, this could be caused by other physical problems besides fatigue; ask your doctor.
- **Prolonged time in bed.** Staying in bed for days can signal depression or increasing weakness. These can often be successfully treated.
- **Pounding in the head.** This can be caused by a blood pressure problem and should be reported.

What Can You Do to Help Lessen Your Own Fatigue?

There are several things you can do to lessen your fatigue or help your medical team treat it.

Remember, everyone's experiences with fatigue and treatments are different. Some people can return to work or normal activity while others cannot. Goals for treating your fatigue are to:

1. **Have as little fatigue as possible**
2. **Maintain regular schedules of sleep and rest**
3. **Learn to use your energy as effectively as possible**

Regardless of the severity of your fatigue, the following ten tips can help you lessen your fatigue or assist you in treating it:



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1. **Take several short naps or breaks rather than one long rest period.** Setting regular times to nap and sleep helps your body learn to expect a routine. Sleep is helped by routine habits.
2. **Plan your day so that you have time to rest.** Resting between activities such as bathing, dressing and walking can help.
3. **Take short walks or do some light exercise if possible.** Some people find this decreases their fatigue. Plan something to do each day, even if it is as little as getting dressed and walking outside to sit in the porch.
4. **Try easier or shorter versions of the activities you enjoy.** Schedule time to rest ahead of an activity. Prioritise the activities that are most enjoyable or most necessary, and plan accordingly.
5. **Eat as well as you can and drink plenty of fluids.** If large meals are too much to handle, try eating frequent smaller meals and snacks.
6. **Ask your family or friends to help you with tasks you find difficult or more taxing.** This will allow you to have more energy for the activities you enjoy.
7. **Keep a diary of how you feel each day.** This will help you with planning your daily activities and can help you and your medical team regulate any anti-fatigue medication you may be taking.
8. **Join a support group, or seek help from an oncology social worker or counsellor.** Sharing your feelings with others can ease the burden of fatigue and you can often learn coping hints from talking about your own situation.
9. **Cultivate interests that are less strenuous, like listening to music or reading.** Relaxing music and meditation can also promote sleep.
10. **Finally, remember that you don't have to do everything - save your energy for things you find most important.**

For further information on cancer-related fatigue

CancerSymptoms.org
Run by The Oncology Nursing Society

www.cancersymptoms.org

The Cancer Society of New Zealand is a non-profit organisation whose mission is "to minimise the impact of cancer on our community". The Cancer Society's Support & Information Service assists people with cancer and family members through one-to-one counselling, support, educational programmes, such as LIVING WITH CANCER and CANSUPPORT, telephone contact, guidance, information and referrals to appropriate services. The Cancer Society also offers assistance with transport to treatment for those who require it, CANTALK newsletter and a specialist library and information service. There is a specialist nurse for patient information who can guide you - email: info@cancersoc.org.nz

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