Fatigue in People With Cancer

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is being tired – physically, mentally, and emotionally. It means having less energy to do the things you need or want to do.

In people with cancer, fatigue can be caused by the cancer itself, cancer treatment, side effects, and more. Fatigue can last a long time, even after treatment ends. It can affect your mood, employment, daily routines, self-care, recreation, relationships, and your sense of self.

The fatigue that comes with cancer, called cancer-related fatigue, is different from the fatigue of daily life. Everyday, normal fatigue usually doesn’t last long and most often gets better when you rest. Cancer-related fatigue is worse and it causes more distress. It’s not the tired feeling people remember having before they had cancer. People describe it 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, as well as move your body. Rest does not make it go away, and just a little activity can exhaust you. For some people, this kind of fatigue causes more distress than pain, nausea, vomiting, or depression.

Cancer-related fatigue can:

- Differ from one day to the next in how bad it is and how much it bothers you
- Be overwhelming and make it hard for you to feel well
- Make it hard for you to be with your friends and family
- Make it hard for you to do your normal activities, including going to work
- Make it harder for you to follow your cancer treatment plan
- Last different lengths of time, which makes it hard to guess how long yours will go on

Many people with cancer say fatigue is the most distressing side effect of cancer and its treatment – it can have a major effect on a person’s quality of life.
Fatigue is very common in people with cancer

Cancer-related fatigue is the most common side effect of cancer and cancer treatment. Research suggests that anywhere from 40% to 100% of people with cancer have fatigue. But even though fatigue is a very distressing symptom, doctors and nurses don’t focus on it, and patients and caregivers seldom report it. This may be why there’s so much variation in the rates of fatigue.

It may be hard for them to talk about it, but it’s common for people with cancer to have fatigue. Someone on your health care team should be able to help you if they know you’re having this problem. Talk to them about your fatigue and how it’s affecting your life. Fatigue management is part of good cancer care.

Watch for signs of fatigue

Here are some signs of fatigue that you and your family can watch for. Talk to your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.

- You feel tired and it doesn’t get better, it keeps coming back, or it becomes severe.
- You’re more tired than usual during or after an activity.
- You’re feeling tired and it’s not related to an activity.
- Your tiredness does not get better with rest or sleep.
- You sleep more.
- You become confused.
- You can’t concentrate or focus your thoughts.
- You have no energy.
- You stay in bed for more than 24 hours.
- Your tiredness disrupts your work, social life, or daily routine.
- You have no desire to do the things you normally do.
- You feel sad, depressed, or irritable.

Fatigue can lead to distress. It can interfere with your daily activities and keep you from doing the things you need and want to do. Fatigue can make you unable to take care of yourself, affect your will to do things, and sometimes make you feel like you can’t continue your cancer treatment. Work with your health care team to find and treat the causes of your fatigue.
Talk about your fatigue

Treating fatigue is an important part of care for you and your family. It’s often possible to lessen fatigue so that life can be more normal. But before anything can be done to help you, your health care team must know about your level of fatigue, or how bad your fatigue is.

People with fatigue describe it in many ways. They may say they feel tired, weak, exhausted, weary, worn-out, or slow. They may say they have no energy and can’t concentrate. They also talk about having heavy arms and legs, little drive to do anything, being unable to sleep or sleeping too much. They may feel moody, sad, irritable, or frustrated. Patients rarely describe what they’re feeling as “fatigue” unless their health care team suggests it.

Describing fatigue

No lab tests or x-rays can diagnose or show your level of fatigue. The best measure of fatigue comes from the way you describe your fatigue level to your health care team. But fatigue can be hard to describe.

You can describe your level of fatigue as none, mild, moderate, or severe. Or you can use a scale of 0 to 10, where a 0 means no fatigue at all, and a 10 means the worst fatigue you can imagine. Ask your doctor or nurse how to describe your fatigue so they can understand how it affects your everyday life.

How bad is your fatigue?

If you have moderate (4 to 6 on the 0 to 10 scale) to severe (7 to 10 on the 0 to 10 scale) fatigue, your doctor could ask you for more information. You might be asked questions like:

- When did the fatigue first start?
- When did you first notice that this fatigue is different?
- How long has it lasted?
- Has it changed over time? In what way?
- Does anything make it better? Worse?
- Are there times of day that you notice it more? How has the fatigue affected the things you do every day or the activities that give meaning and enjoyment to your life?
- Do you have any other problems or concerns?

In planning how to treat your fatigue, your doctor might take into account things like your type of cancer, the type and length of treatment, how likely the treatment is to cause fatigue, and your response to treatment.
What causes fatigue in people with cancer?

Fatigue can be caused by the cancer and by its treatment, and is often caused by more than one thing. Doctors don’t always know all the reasons a person might have fatigue, but these are fairly common:

- Cancer itself can cause fatigue by spreading to the bone marrow and causing anemia (a low red blood cell count). Red blood cells carry oxygen to fuel all the cells in the body. Too few red blood cells means not enough energy to meet the body’s needs.
- Many cancer treatments, like chemotherapy, radiation, stem cell transplant, and immunotherapy, cause anemia too, by killing fast-growing cells – especially the cells in the bone marrow that make blood.
- Cancer and cancer treatment can change normal protein and hormone levels and are linked to inflammatory processes that can cause or worsen fatigue.
- Treatments kill normal cells and cancer cells, which leads to a build-up of cell waste. The body uses extra energy to clean up and repair damaged tissue.
- Cancer can also cause fatigue indirectly by forming toxic substances in the body that change the way normal cells work.

Talking with your doctor about it is the first step in trying to find out its cause. Even when the doctor knows the cause, there’s often no “quick fix.” But there are things you and your doctor can do that might make fatigue better.

Here are some questions about fatigue and your cancer treatment that you may want to ask:

- Will my cancer treatment cause fatigue?
- Is my fatigue caused by anemia? If so, how will it be treated?
- How bad is the fatigue likely to get?
- What can be done to control my fatigue or make it better?
- If my fatigue gets bad, how will you treat it?
- What can be done if the fatigue doesn’t get better with treatment?
- What are the likely side effects of the treatments for fatigue?
- Are there other health care professionals who can help manage my fatigue?
Other things that can affect fatigue

Fatigue is different for every cancer patient and can have multiple causes. You should be checked for other things that often make fatigue worse. Managing them can greatly help reduce the fatigue. Some of these are reviewed here.

Anemia

Anemia is a condition that is caused by a low red blood cell count. Your red blood cell count will be measured with a blood test called a CBC. (CBC stands for complete blood count.) Doctors often define anemia as a blood hemoglobin (HGB) level of less than 12 g/dL (grams per deciliter). But many people do not feel much different until the hemoglobin level falls below 11 g/dL. Symptoms of anemia get worse as the hemoglobin gets lower, and can include:

- Fast heart beat
- Shortness of breath
- Trouble breathing with activity (such as when walking or climbing stairs)
- Dizziness
- Pale skin, mouth, or nail beds
- Fatigue

There are many different causes of anemia. Your health care team will try to find out what’s causing yours, so they can treat it and help you feel better.

For more on this, please see Anemia in People With Cancer.

Pain

Cancer pain can make you less active, make you not want to eat, cause sleep problems, and cause depression – all of which can lead to fatigue. Cancer pain should not be accepted as part of cancer treatment. Something can always be done to make pain better.

Talk to your doctor or nurse to get more information about treating cancer pain. You can also learn more in our Guide to Controlling Cancer Pain.

Emotional distress

People with cancer go through a lot of unpleasant emotions. There are many different types of feelings, from anger to depression. These uncomfortable feelings are often called distress. Distress can include a feeling of sadness about the loss of good health or fear of what will happen in the future. It’s normal to have these feelings. But sometimes the
distress becomes so great that it causes physical problems like fatigue. Depression and anxiety are common types of distress that can cause or worsen fatigue.

For more information on distress, see our documents called *Distress in People With Cancer* and *Anxiety, Fear, and Depression*.

**Sleep problems**

If you wake up often during the night, have trouble falling asleep, or wake up early in the morning and can’t go back to sleep, you’re probably not getting the rest you need. This change in your sleep can lead to fatigue. Tell your doctor or nurse about your sleep problems. They will try to find out why you’re having trouble sleeping so they can help plan the best treatment for this problem.

**Medicines**

Many medicines can cause fatigue and problems with thinking. This includes certain over-the-counter drugs and possibly other supplements, as well as prescription medicines. The drugs most likely to cause fatigue are

- Pain medicines
- Sleep medicines
- Anti-depressants
- Anti-nausea medicines
- Anti-seizure medicines
- Certain antihistamines
- Certain heart medicines

Some of these drugs can also make you feel sleepy. The degree of sleepiness varies from person to person. Taking many drugs that have a lot of side effects can make fatigue worse, too. It’s important to tell your health care team about all vitamins, herbs, supplements, and medicines you take. Don’t forget the non-prescription drugs and those you use every now and then as needed.

Keeping a journal of everything you take, along with the doses, times, and when you have symptoms, might help you find out which ones may be part of your fatigue.

**Other medical problems**

Many people have other medical problems or illnesses that are not related to cancer but may add to fatigue. These illnesses should be identified and treated. Examples of other medical problems that could be part of fatigue are:
• Problems with other organs, such as the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, or brain
• Nervous system problems
• Digestive system problems
• Infections, such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections, or viral illnesses
• Dehydration
• Low adrenal gland function (rare, but can cause low blood pressure, fainting, and dehydration)
• Low sex hormones (such as estrogen in women or testosterone in men)
• Low thyroid function

If needed, your doctor can test you to find out if any of these are making your fatigue worse. For example, low thyroid gland function is fairly common in people in the United States. It can often be detected by a simple blood test and is easy to treat. Your doctor may be able to find and treat problems such as these to help with your fatigue.

**Poor nutrition**

The body needs protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals, and water to do its work. Changes in nutrition can affect fatigue. These changes include how well the body can process nutrients and the need for more energy than usual. It can also have to do with poor intake of food, fluids, and certain minerals. The changes can be caused by:

• Changes in metabolism (the body’s ability to break down and use food)
• The increased energy needed to repair damaged cells
• Uncontrolled tumor growth competing for nutrients (the cancer takes energy, protein, vitamins, and the like, for its own growth)
• Poor appetite (you don’t feel like eating)
• Nausea and vomiting
• Diarrhea

You may have blood tests to measure important minerals your body needs, like sodium, potassium, calcium, and magnesium. You can ask to see a registered dietitian who can help you learn how to best meet your nutrition needs during this time.

You can find more information on this in *Nutrition for the Person With Cancer During Treatment: A Guide for Patients and Families.*
Lack of exercise

Cancer treatment along with less physical activity can make you less able to do the things you used to do. You might find that it takes much more effort and more energy to do the things you need to do. But doing less can make fatigue worse.

Though it may seem strange, physical activity can help decrease fatigue and help build up your stamina to do more of your usual activities. Resting, on the other hand, can make fatigue worse in the long run.

Talk to your doctor before you start any exercise program. A careful work-up by a physical therapist can help you plan the right physical activities for you.

You can find more in our document called Nutrition and Physical Activity During and After Cancer Treatment: Answers to Common Questions.

Alcohol or other non-prescribed drugs

Alcohol and other “recreational” drugs might make you feel better for a short time, but in the long run make you feel more tired and disrupt your sleep. They can also interact with the cancer drugs you are taking, and may cause their own medical problems. If you think drinking or other drugs might be a problem for you, talk honestly with your doctor about how much and how often you drink or use drugs. Keep in mind, too, that alcohol is a carcinogen (cancer-causing agent), which many people with cancer prefer to completely avoid.

Tips for managing fatigue

Doctors, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, nutritionists, and a number of others might be involved in treating your fatigue. Education and counseling can be important parts of helping you learn how to save energy, reduce stress, and distract yourself from the fatigue.

Fatigue is often caused by more than one problem. Treating a certain problem, like anemia, might make you feel better, but other things may need to be done, too. For this reason your health care team might have you try many different things to help manage your fatigue.

It can be hard even for the doctor to figure out exactly what’s causing your fatigue. Still, a program of regular exercise, managing your stress, and finding ways to deal with anxiety and depression seem to help most people. Treating sleep problems and correcting nutrition problems also help fatigue. Keep in mind that it can take up to 8 weeks of treatment before you notice your fatigue getting better, though for some people it could happen faster.
Save your energy

Conserving (or saving) energy is one way to make sure you have enough energy to do what needs to be done each day. You may need to accept the fact that you can’t do everything you want to do. Each day, decide which things are the most important to you and focus on those tasks. Do things slowly, so that you won’t use too much energy at once. Let others help you. This can help them feel useful and get your tasks done, too.

Use distraction

Sometimes feeling tired can become so discouraging and frustrating that it’s easy to let it become all you think about. Try to distract yourself with other things, like listening to music, having relaxing visits with friends or family, or reading a book. These things can give you an escape from your fatigue without using up too much energy.

Use attention-restoring activities

Certain activities can help you relax, and focus better. These activities include things like walking in a park, sitting in a peaceful setting, gardening, doing volunteer work not related to your illness, or bird watching. Some people use meditation or guided imagery to clear their minds without leaving home.

Reduce stress

Having cancer is stressful and cancer treatment can cause even more stress. Talk with a social worker or nurse on your health care team about your level of stress. This can help you know if it’s “normal” stress or more worrisome anxiety or depression. Feeling tired might be linked to feeling depressed and anxious. Support groups, mental health counseling, stress management training, and relaxation exercises are some ways you can learn to improve the feelings related to fatigue and help overcome the tiredness you feel.

Exercise

Research has shown that there are some ways other than medicines to improve your energy and activity level. Aerobic and strength-building exercise programs – started only with your doctor’s OK – can lead to better body function, as well as feeling better about your life and well-being. You may need to see a physical therapist to build stamina and learn the best exercise routines for you to follow at this time.

Talk to your doctor first and always be careful about exercising if you have any of these:

- Cancer that has spread to your bones (bone metastasis)
- A low white blood cell count
- A low platelet count
- A fever or active infection
- Anemia
- Unsteadiness, frailty, or other problem that might make exercise unsafe for you

These factors can lead to injury, pain, bleeding, or other problems if they aren’t taken into account before you start to exercise. If you have any of these factors, your exercise program will need to be set up by a professional who knows about exercise and cancer.

Not only can exercise help fatigue, it can also help you sleep better. Another benefit of exercise is that it can make your mood better, too.

Get nutrition counseling

Many cancer patients have changes in the way they eat, swallow, and taste things during treatment. Talking with a registered dietitian may help you learn ways to manage problems like loss of appetite, diarrhea, nausea, or vomiting. The dietitian also can make sure you are getting enough fluids and nutrients to help keep your blood chemistry balanced.

Improve sleep

Sleep problems are common during cancer treatment. You may have trouble falling asleep or sleep too much. Certain drugs used to treat pain, nausea, or depression can make a person feel tired and sleepy. Talk with your doctor about this. Sometimes adjusting the doses or changing to a different drug can help.

Sleep experts tell us that having regular times to go to bed and get up helps us keep a healthy sleep routine. Avoiding caffeine in fluids (like coffee, tea, energy drinks, or soda), medicines (like headache remedies), or even in foods (like chocolate) for at least 8 hours before bed can help, too. Exercising too late in the evening might cause sleep problems. You might need naps, but try to keep them short (under an hour) and early in the day so they don’t interfere with nighttime sleep. If you’re having trouble sleeping, it can help to see a mental health professional who can work with you on causes and how to address sleep problems.

Ask about medicines

There’s no magic pill that can make you less tired and give you more energy. But there are some medicines that might help you with fatigue. In some cases, fatigue can be bad enough that your doctor or nurse recommends a stimulant medicine for a short time. Examples of this type of medicine are methylphenidate hydrochloride (Ritalin®) or modafanil (Provigil®). These have been shown to help at least a little with fatigue. Anti-depressant drugs and steroids have also been used to try and help fatigue.
If you’re having problems sleeping, your doctor or nurse may suggest a medicine to help you sleep.

More research is needed and is being done in this area, but there are drugs available that may give you relief if your fatigue gets bad.

**Coping with fatigue**

Learning about fatigue, how bad it might be, and how long it might last are key parts of dealing with fatigue. Many times, a family member who learns with you can help you talk to your health care team about your fatigue.

Here’s a recap of things you can do to help manage and reduce your fatigue:

- List your activities in order of how important they are to you, so you can do the more important ones when you have the most energy.
- Ask for help and have other people do things for you when possible.
- Focus on one thing at a time; don’t try to multi-task.
- Put things that you often use within easy reach.
- Set up and follow a structured daily routine, keeping as normal a level of activity as possible.
- Balance rest and activity. Too much time in bed can make you weak. Try to avoid it. Schedule activities so that you have time for plenty of rest that doesn’t interfere with nighttime sleep. A few short rest periods during the day are better than one long one.
- Learn ways to deal with your stress. Try to reduce it using things like deep breathing, imagery, meditation, prayer, talking with others, reading, listening to music, painting, or any other things you like to do.
- Keep a record of how you feel each day. Take it with you when you see your doctor.
- Talk to your doctor about how to manage any pain, nausea, or depression you may have.
- Talk to your doctor about physical exercise before you start an exercise program. Then tell your doctor how you’re doing after you start exercise, especially if you want to increase your activity.
- Get fresh air, if possible.
- Unless you’re given other instructions, eat a balanced diet that includes protein (meat, milk, eggs, and beans) and drink about 8 to 10 glasses of water a day.

The first thing to do for fatigue is talk to your doctor or nurse about it. Let them know how bad it is so you can get the help you need to deal with it.
Remember: There’s no one way to diagnose or treat fatigue. The best treatment for you is most likely going to be found through open discussions with your doctor and nurse.

**To learn more**

**More information from your American Cancer Society**

Here is more information you might find helpful. You also can order free copies of our documents from our toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345, or read them on our website, www.cancer.org.

Coping With Cancer in Everyday Life (also in Spanish)

Anemia in People With Cancer

Distress in People With Cancer

Anxiety, Fear, and Depression (also in Spanish)

Guide to Controlling Cancer Pain (also in Spanish)

Physical Activity and the Cancer Patient

Nutrition for the Person With Cancer During Treatment: A Guide for Patients and Families (also in Spanish)

Nutrition and Physical Activity During and After Cancer Treatment: Answers to Common Questions

Chemo Brain

**Books**

Your American Cancer Society also has books that you might find helpful. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or visit our bookstore online to find out about costs or to place an order.

**National organizations and websites***

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

**CancerCare**
Toll-free number: 1-800-813-4673 (1-800-813-HOPE)
Website: www.cancercare.org

Offers counseling by phone and support from others with cancer online and by phone. Cancer information and workshops are also available
National Cancer Institute
Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237 (1-800-4-CANCER)
TTY: 1-800-332-8615
Website: www.cancer.gov

Offers a wide variety of cancer information, including information on fatigue, coping, finding support, and clinical trials

OncoLink
Website: www.oncolink.org

Information on cancer and coping with symptoms, including fatigue

*Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or visit www.cancer.org.

References


