



# Getting Help for Fatigue

Fatigue is when your body and brain feel tired. It means you don't have the energy to do the things you want or need to do.

The fatigue that comes with cancer is different from the fatigue of daily life. Everyday, normal fatigue is a short-term problem that gets better with rest. Cancer-related fatigue is worse, and it causes more distress. Rest does not make it go away, and even a little activity may exhaust you.

Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most common and distressing side effects of cancer and its treatment.

## What causes fatigue in people with cancer?

Cancer can cause fatigue. It is also very common with cancer treatments, such as chemo and radiation therapy. Other things that come with cancer can make fatigue worse, things like low blood counts, pain, and sleep problems.

## Talking about your fatigue

Before your health care team can help you, they must know how bad your fatigue is. The best measure comes from your own report of your fatigue. But fatigue can be hard to describe.

People describe fatigue in many ways. Some say they feel tired, weak, exhausted, weary, worn out, or slow. They may say they have no energy and can't focus. Some also talk about their arms and legs feeling heavy, having little drive to do anything, and being unable to sleep or sleeping too much. They may say they feel moody, sad, irritable, or frustrated. Try to find words to explain how your fatigue makes you feel.

## How bad is it?

You can describe your level of fatigue as none, mild, moderate, or severe. Or you can use a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means no fatigue at all, and 10 means the worst fatigue you can imagine.

You may be asked questions like:

- When did the fatigue start? How long has it lasted?
- Has it changed over time? In what way?
- Does anything make it better? Worse?
- How has it affected what you do every day or the things that bring meaning to your life?

# Tips to manage fatigue

## Save your energy.

- Decide which things are the most important to do and focus on those tasks first.
- Do things slowly so that you will not use too much energy as you go.
- Ask for help, and have other people do things for you when possible.
- 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 you can.

## Distract yourself.

Feeling tired can discourage and frustrate you. It's easy to let it become the focus of your thoughts. Try to distract yourself with other things, like listening to music or reading a book. These things can give you an escape from your fatigue without using up too much energy.

## Exercise.

An aerobic exercise program – started only with your doctor's OK – can ease fatigue, help your heart and lungs work better, and make you feel better. You may need to see a physical therapist to learn the best exercise plan for you to follow at this time.

## Eat well.

- Talk with your health care team about ways to manage problems like loss of appetite, diarrhea, nausea, or vomiting.
- Unless you are told otherwise, eat a balanced diet that includes protein (meat, milk, eggs, and beans) and drink about 8 to 10 glasses of water a day.

## Get good sleep.

- Avoid caffeine in drinks (like coffee, tea, or soda), or even in foods (like chocolate).
- Do not exercise too late in the evening; this may cause sleep problems.
- You may need naps, but try to keep them short (less than 30 minutes) and early in the day so they don't mess up your nighttime sleep.
- Try to avoid too much time in bed. It can make you weak.

## Relax.

- Try walking, sitting in a peaceful setting, gardening, or bird-watching.
- Try to reduce stress using things like deep breathing, meditation, prayer, talking with others, 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.

**Remember:** There is no one way to diagnose or treat distress. Let your doctor or nurse know how you are feeling so you can get the help you may need.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

