

## **Managing Cancer Related Fatigue**

### **What is cancer related fatigue?**

Cancer related fatigue is a daily lack of energy due to cancer or cancer treatment. It can interfere with your ability to engage in your usual activities and is not relieved by sleep.

### **What are signs of fatigue?**

- Feeling tired and weary even after sleeping
- Lacking energy or interest in carrying out regular activities
- Having trouble concentrating, remembering, or thinking clearly
- Feeling negative, irritable, impatient, or unmotivated
- Spending less attention to personal appearance
- Spending more time in bed or sleeping

### **What causes cancer related fatigue?**

The actual causes of cancer fatigue are unknown. Cancer related fatigue may be the result of certain body processes during treatment, including surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation.

**Chemotherapy and Biologic Therapy**- can cause fatigue. The intensity of fatigue can vary from person to person. It can last for a few days or persist throughout and beyond treatment.

**Radiation Therapy** - Radiation therapy can cause fatigue that increases over time. This is a cumulative fatigue and can persist from three to four weeks or up to two to three months.

**Other factors** that may contribute to cancer related fatigue include:

- Anemia – a reduction of the oxygen carrying red blood cells due to treatment.
- Combination therapy- patients receiving more than one treatment at a time or one after another, such as chemotherapy followed by radiation, may experience more fatigue.
- Medications used to treat nausea, pain, depression or seizures can also contribute to fatigue.
- Pain - Research shows that chronic pain increases fatigue.
- Stress, insomnia, anxiety, depression and decreased nutrition can contribute to fatigue.
- Hypothyroidism- An underactive thyroid gland which can develop after radiation to the lymph nodes in the neck, may also be linked to fatigue.

### **What can I do to combat fatigue?**

The best way to combat fatigue is to treat the cause. Talk to your doctor about cancer related fatigue. Your physician may order some tests to rule out hidden causes. Unfortunately, the cause may not be known or there may be many causes.

### **Ways to manage fatigue:**

#### **REST**

- Plan out the day, and prioritize tasks and activities, so you have time to rest.

- Although sleep and rest are important do not “overdo” it.
- Plan short rest periods (15 to 30 minute). Rest before you feel tired. Plan to get at least six to eight hours of sleep each night.

### STAY ACTIVE

- Regular moderate exercise such as walking helps increase your energy level and your ability to stay active.

### SAVE ENERGY

- Pace yourself. Avoid rushing or doing too many activities in a short span of time.
- Alternate easy tasks with more difficult ones.
- Sit to dress, shave, care for hair, put on make-up and dry off after a shower.
- Try to alternate sitting and standing to conserve energy.
- Wait 30 minutes after eating before doing a task.
- Let dishes soak instead of scrubbing and air dry dishes rather than drying. Use paper plates, napkins and cups.
- Use wheels to move items. E.g. shopping carts, garbage can with wheels, carts for cleaning / repair supplies or moving heavy laundry bags.
- Avoid extremes of temperature. Avoid long, hot showers or baths.

### ENLIST HELP

- Ask for help from family and friends. People who offer to help really want to assist you, but they may not know what to do.

For example, consider asking for help with:

- Shopping

- Preparing meals
- Doing housework
- Running errands
- Delegate. If friends or family want to coordinate help for you, let them do the planning.

- Hire help if you need it.
- Consider joining a support group. Sharing feelings with others may relieve the burden of fatigue.

### GOOD NUTRITION:

- Plan meals and snacks in advance.
- Use high calorie and high protein foods.
- Consider community programs such as Meals on Wheels or a community center's lunch program.
- A nutrition consult may be necessary to help with suggestions to maximize calories and proteins in smaller amounts.

Remember - Fatigue caused by cancer treatment is short-term. Your energy will slowly come back, especially if you stay active

### **When should I call the doctor or nurse?**

Contact your health care provider if you:

- Develop fatigue that limits your ability to care for yourself.
- Feel confused, dizzy, lose your balance or fall
- Develop increasing shortness of breath with minimal exertion
- Develop uncontrolled pain.
- Are unable to control side effects from treatment, including Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite.

- Develop uncontrolled anxiety or nervousness.
- Have ongoing depression.

### **Additional Resources**

These web sites have additional information on Cancer related fatigue:

- National Cancer Institute (800-4-CANCER)  
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)
- American Cancer Society (800-ACS-2345)  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)
- Livestrong Foundation cancer support (866-673-7205 [www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org))

**Notes/Additional Information:** \_\_\_\_\_

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Sources:  
The American Cancer Society @ [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)  
ASCO Guidelines, [cancer.net](http://cancer.net)  
Chemotherapy and biotherapy guidelines second edition 2009  
10/2010