

Cancer-Related Fatigue



This Information Sheet explains cancer-related fatigue and its causes. Some practical suggestions for managing fatigue are offered. We hope you find it helpful.

What is the difference between fatigue and tiredness?

Fatigue is often confused with tiredness. Tiredness happens to everyone – it is an expected feeling after certain activities or at the end of the day. Usually, you know why you are tired and a good night's sleep solves the problem.

Fatigue is a daily lack of energy; an unusual or excessive whole-body tiredness not relieved by sleep. It can be acute (lasting a month or less) or chronic (lasting from 1 – 6 months or more). Fatigue can prevent a person from functioning normally and impacts on a person's quality of life.

What is cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer and its treatment. It is not predictable by tumour type, treatment or stage of illness. It may come on suddenly or you may become aware that you have been 'tired' for a long time. This fatigue does not result from activity or exertion, and is not relieved by rest or sleep. It may continue after treatment is complete. The exact reason for this fatigue is unknown, but it may be that as cancer cells die they release waste products. Your liver and kidneys have to work harder to get rid of these toxins, using valuable energy.

Cancer treatments commonly associated with fatigue

- **Chemotherapy** – Any chemotherapy drug may cause fatigue, but it may be more common with vincristine, vinblastine and cisplatin. Patients frequently experience fatigue after several weeks of chemotherapy, but this varies. Some patients find that fatigue lasts a few days, while others report fatigue persisting throughout the course of treatment and continuing after the treatment is complete.
- **Radiation therapy** – This can cause fatigue that increases over time. This can occur regardless of the treatment site. Fatigue usually lasts 3–4 weeks after treatment stops but can continue for several months.
- **Bone marrow transplant** – This aggressive form of treatment can cause fatigue that lasts up to a year.
- **Biological therapy** – Interferons and interleukins are cytokines, natural proteins that are normally released by white blood cells in response to infection. These cytokines carry messages that regulate the immune and endocrine systems. In high amounts, they can be toxic and lead to persistent fatigue.
- **Combination therapy** – More than one cancer treatment at the same time or one after the other increases the chances of developing fatigue.

Other factors that may contribute to cancer-related fatigue

- **Decreased nutrition** – Tumour cells may compete for nutrients at the expense of normal cell growth. Side effects of treatments (such as nausea, vomiting, mouth ulcers, taste changes, heartburn or diarrhoea) can contribute to fatigue.
- **Anaemia** – A blood disorder that occurs when there is not enough haemoglobin (a substance in red blood cells which transports oxygen around the body) in the blood. Anaemia can cause fatigue but is treatable.
- **Hypothyroidism** – occurs when there are low levels of hormones produced by the thyroid gland in the neck. This can occur after radiation therapy to the lymph glands in the neck. It can be treated.
- **Medications** – Some medications used to treat side effects, such as nausea, pain, depression, anxiety and seizures can cause fatigue. Ask your doctor if you are unsure.
- **Prolonged, severe pain**
- **Stress** – Stress can result from dealing with the disease and the “unknowns” and can worsen feelings of fatigue.
- **Depression** – Depression and fatigue go hand-in-hand. It may not be clear which started first. If your mood is low much of the time, you are preoccupied with feeling worthless or useless, or have no interest in things which used to give you pleasure, you may benefit from treatment for depression.

What can I do to combat fatigue?

Assessment

1. **Consider your level of energy.** Think of your personal energy stores as a ‘bank’. Regular withdrawals (moderate exercise,

household chores and attendance at treatment) and deposits (nutritious food and rest) are made over the day or week to keep an energy supply available. Some people find keeping a diary helpful.

2. **Be alert to your personal warning signs of fatigue.** For example short temper, loss of appetite or low mood.

Energy Conservation

1. Plan ahead and organise your work

- Change storage of items to reduce walking to and fro or reaching.
- Combine activities and simplify details. Sit down to do chores whenever you can and try to spread the load evenly during the week rather than doing everything at once.
- Give tasks to others.

2. Schedule rest

- Balance periods of rest and activity.
- Take rest breaks between activities.
- A ‘power nap’ during the day of an hour or less can be beneficial. Try to have your nap early in the afternoon so your night sleep is unaffected.

3. Pace yourself.

4. **Try to reduce stress.** Learning relaxation techniques including deep breathing or visualisation may be helpful. You may find activities that divert your attention away from fatigue, such as knitting, reading or music, beneficial.

5. **Consider the effects of your environment,** such as smoking or temperature.

6. Prioritise your activities

- Decide what activities are important for you to do and what can be asked of others. Use your energy on important tasks.
- Help others understand and support you. Tell family and friends how they can help. Be specific, for example “I need someone to do the vacuuming every week”
- Consult with your doctor before beginning an exercise programme.
- Start slowly, allowing your body time to adjust.
- Most exercises are safe as long as you exercise with care and don't over do it.
- Good exercise activities include swimming, walking, cycling.
- Some gyms have specialised programmes.

Nutrition

- Cancer-related fatigue is often made worse if you are not eating enough or not eating the right foods. Eat as well as you can. There is good advice in the Cancer Society booklet *Eating Well/Kia Pai te Kai*. Phone **0800 CANCER (226 237)** to receive a copy.
- Ideally you should stay about the same weight you were before you had cancer – if you are struggling to do this, it may be useful to see a dietician.
- Try to eat a wide variety of healthy foods, including protein.
- Drink plenty of fluids – a minimum of 8 cups of fluid daily (1500 mls) is recommended. Fluids can include water, juice, milk, soup, milkshakes and jelly. Be aware that you will need more fluid if you have side effects such as vomiting or diarrhoea.

Cancer-related fatigue usually begins to lift when treatment ends. However, some people are fatigued for some time after treatment is finished. Fatigue can go away only to return again. You may be frustrated if your recovery takes longer than you expected. Try to be patient with yourself as you adjust.

References

Cancer Backup – www.cancerbackup.org.uk

CancerHelp UK – www.cancerhelp.org.uk

The Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy Survival Guide – Judith McKay & Nancee Hirano

After Cancer – Wendy Schessel Harpham, MD.

Exercise

There is growing evidence that exercise plays an important part in reducing fatigue. Regular, moderate exercise can decrease feelings of tiredness and lack of energy. Even during cancer therapy it is often possible to continue exercising.