

Fatigue management

Cancer-related fatigue is defined as

‘a distressing, persistent, subjective sense of physical, emotional, and/or cognitive tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer or cancer treatment that is not proportional to recent activity and interferes with usual functioning.’

Eighty per cent of individuals who receive chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy are estimated to have symptoms of cancer-related fatigue. These symptoms can last for months or years after cancer treatment is completed. Cancer-related fatigue affects an individual’s quality of life as it can impact on participation in meaningful daily activities or roles.

Contributing factors

Treatable factors that contribute to cancer-related fatigue can include:

- physical changes caused by cancer or treatment
- emotions such as grief, fear or frustration
- anaemia (low red blood cell count)
- irregular sleep routine
- poor nutrition including excessive caffeine or alcohol consumption
- decreased activity levels
- other health problems e.g. infection, or those impacting heart and lung function.

Onset of fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue can fluctuate over the course of cancer treatment and is influenced by the type of treatment received.

- Patients receiving chemotherapy will often experience fatigue 1-2 weeks following a chemotherapy treatment.
- Patients undergoing radiotherapy will often experience fatigue that peaks towards the end of their therapy and gradually decreases after therapy is completed.

General strategies for managing fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue can often be treatable or manageable. It is important to identify the factors that are causing your fatigue so that appropriate advice can be given. Everyone is different therefore some strategies may be more effective than others. Strategies which can be helpful include:

Self monitoring of fatigue levels

Create a treatment diary that outlines the symptoms of your fatigue including onset, pattern, duration, changes over time and factors that may increase or decrease your fatigue. This can then be used to plan your day to maximise energy levels for activity.



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Energy conservation

Involves working more efficiently to decrease the strain on the body and reduce the amount of energy required to do tasks. It helps to maintain a balance between rest and activity when energy levels are high so that meaningful activities can be maintained.

- Set priorities and realistic expectations.
- Pace yourself.
- Ask for help or delegate tasks.
- Schedule high-energy activities at times of peak energy.
- Use assistive equipment e.g. long-handled aids.
- Adopt techniques that require less effort e.g. sit when possible.
- Postpone or eliminate nonessential activities.
- Take regular short breaks between activities.
- Establish a good sleeping pattern.
- Create a structured daily routine.
- Perform one activity at a time.

Stress management, relaxation and distraction

Stress (worry, fear, frustration) can contribute to fatigue. Stress can make the mind and/or body tired, or can reduce the amount of sleep (or the quality of sleep) that we get.

It is important to recognise what experiences or situations cause you stress, and how you can reduce or manage stress better.

It is also important to be aware of your emotions and attitudes; consider trying to limit or stop the following:

Stress management

- Comparing yourself with other patients - no two people or treatments are the same. Comparing yourself with others may lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and a sense of failure if you don't match with another person's experience.
- Comparing your performance now with how you were before treatment. Be gentle with yourself and recognise that your body needs more rest time now.
- Being a 'Superman' or 'Superwoman'. Some people feel that unless they do a job, it won't be done right. Now is a good time to re-examine this belief and choose to allow others to assume some responsibility. You may be doing them a favour!

Relaxation

The term 'relaxation' can mean different things to different people. There are formal and informal ways to relax, such as deep breathing, relaxing muscles or simply listening to calming music.

Speak to your Occupational Therapist if you would like to know more about stress management and relaxation tips. Knowing different strategies can be beneficial when going through treatment and procedures, as well as assisting to relax and sleep

Distraction—do things you enjoy

Studies have suggested that distracting activities are helpful in decreasing fatigue levels. It is important to take time to do things that you enjoy such as a hobby or leisure activity e.g. listening to music, reading, playing games, spending time with friends or performing relaxation.

Activity

Being active can help reduce fatigue during and after treatment. Research also shows that people who exercise have lower risk of disease recurrence.

Inactivity can lead to having less strength which then leads to feeling more fatigued. Your body can become weaker which makes fatigue much worse. The type of fatigue caused by cancer treatment is different to the tiredness we feel after completing physical activity. The tiredness you feel after physical activity can reduce how fatigued/tired you feel. Make sure to check with your doctor before starting any exercise as some conditions (heart/lung problems, cancer that has spread to the bones), may put you at risk while exercising.

Sleep techniques

Ensure you get enough sleep. If you are having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep talk to your Occupational Therapist about sleep tips.

Nutrition

Make sure you get enough nutrients.

It is important to give your body fuel to do the things you need to in your day. If you are having problems eating and/or swallowing talk to your Dietitian or Speech Pathologist.

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Reducing fatigue in specific daily activities

Think about the different areas of your life such as looking after yourself, work, and leisure. It is important to have a balance between these areas. It is also important to consider each area when trying to manage fatigue. This will help you get the most out of your day and maintain the best quality of life.

Self cares

Includes activities like having a bath/shower, going to the toilet, getting dressed, eating etc. Consider the following:

- Showering uses less energy than getting in/out of a bath. You may choose to use a shower chair to sit on whilst showering.
- Sit down to dry and dress yourself.
- Long-handled aids such as dressing sticks, brushes, and sponges can assist those who have difficulty bending over.

Talk to your Occupational Therapist if you have any concerns with the set-up of your bathroom for safety or fatigue reasons. They can look at ideas such as bath boards to sit on across the bath, grab rails, shower chairs and non-slip mats.

Work or productivity

This includes activities such as paid employment, volunteer work, other household tasks and chores such as cleaning, laundry, cooking, mowing. Consider the following:

Employment

- When thinking about a return to work think about a gradual return. For example, work part time for a while and slowly build up your hours, or return on light duties –to get your body used to being back at work, and to allow for rest breaks if required.
- Talk with your doctor about continuing to work or returning to work.

Cooking

- Plan the meal, doing as much as you can ahead of time.
- Spread the tasks over the day or do some the day before.
- Use simple menus that have fewer steps.
- Buy pre-cut meats, ask your butcher to cut your meats for you, or purchase ready made foods.
- When cooking, place all utensils and ingredients on, or within easy reach of, the work area.
- Use dishes in which you can cook and serve.

Cleaning

- Don't do it all at once!
- Have cleaning equipment on hand – bath cleaners in bathroom, kitchen supplies in kitchen etc.
- Use long-handled mops, duster and dustpan, and broom to save bending and reaching.
- Arrange furniture so you don't need to shift it every time you clean the room.
- Get a mop bucket on wheels.

Ironing

- Fold clothes as they are taken from the line. They will be less creased and easier to iron.
- Do a little ironing each day, rather than tiring yourself doing it once a week.
- Sit to do the ironing. If standing, adjust height for good posture.
- Plan to buy clothes that wash easily and require little ironing.
- Do not iron things that can go without eg. sheets, tea towels.

Leisure

- Change your leisure activities to lighter activities e.g. scrap booking, movies, reading, bird watching, relaxing on the beach or in a park etc.
- Plan leisure activities around times when you have the most energy.
- Have rest breaks during gentle exercise or social activities.

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