



Coping with Cancer-Related Fatigue

Fatigue, unusual or excessive whole-body tiredness, is one of the most common symptoms associated with cancer. It can occur before, during and after diagnosis and treatment of many cancers. Fatigue can change your ability to perform your usual daily activities. It may also interfere with your quality of life.

It is important to recognize and manage cancer-related fatigue. This is so you can have the energy to cope effectively with your cancer and take the steps you need to aid your recovery. The following information will help you recognize when cancer-related fatigue may be affecting you, and what you can do about it.

What is cancer-related fatigue?

Fatigue is more than the occasional weariness.

Common signs of fatigue include:

- Regular feelings of weakness and exhaustion.

Other less obvious indicators include:

- Pain or weakness in the legs
- Difficulty climbing stairs or walking short distances
- Being short of breath after only light activity – like cooking a meal or taking a shower.

Fatigue can also affect the way you think and feel. It can cause you to have difficulty concentrating, lose interest in your pastimes, and make you impatient. If you are finding it more difficult to do everyday things like maintaining your personal appearance, eating meals, or shopping, you may be experiencing fatigue.

What can I do about my fatigue?

First, it is important to talk with your doctor or nurse about your fatigue. Good communication can help your healthcare team suggest ways to improve your energy and manage fatigue-related challenges.

There are also some things you can do right away to help yourself with fatigue.

What you can do to help yourself

1. Conserve your energy

Managing your fatigue effectively involves **learning to prioritize, plan, delegate and modify daily life activities**. Here are some strategies to try:

- Delegate what you can! It's important to remember that you don't have to do everything yourself. Save your energy for things that bring joy to your life or things that you find most important.
- Spread your activities throughout the day and organize your time to avoid rushing.
- Practice good body mechanics. Small changes, such as minimizing bending-over to put on clothes and shoes, can make a big difference.
- Schedule household tasks throughout the week and delegate them when possible.
- Plan childcare activities to allow for sitting down. Teach children to climb up on your lap or into the highchair instead of being lifted.
- Get adequate rest by taking several short naps or breaks during the day rather than one long rest period.
- Don't force yourself to do more than you can manage.

2. Maintain or start a modified exercise routine

Plan something active to do each day, even if it is as little as getting dressed and walking outside to sit on the porch.

- Staying active during the day will give you more energy and help encourage normal fatigue at night, making sleep easier.
- Talk with your healthcare team about an exercise plan that is appropriate for you.
- Start exercising slowly and gradually.
- Schedule time to rest before and after an activity.
- Communicate with your healthcare team about any unpleasant side effects that you experience while exercising.

3. Eat a nutritionally balanced diet

Consult with a dietitian to ensure that you are eating a nutritionally balanced diet, including good sources of protein.

- It is better to eat small meals or snacks throughout the day instead of one or two large meals.
- Be sure to drink plenty of water. Eight 8-ounce glasses of fluid are recommended every day unless your physician or nurse tells you otherwise.

4. *Care for your emotional self*

In coping with fatigue, it can be helpful to schedule activities that are rejuvenating and healing.

- Consider joining a support group or speaking with a skilled therapist.
- Take time to experience nature, plan for enjoyable distractions, or find ways to incorporate humor into your life.
- However you choose to cope with your fatigue, try not to criticize yourself for not accomplishing as much as you used to. **Focus on the present, taking pleasure in what you can do.**

Using these strategies and with the support of your healthcare team, you can learn to successfully cope with your fatigue and focus your energy on activities that are most important to you.

The UCSF Psycho-Oncology service at the Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is staffed by psychologists and psychiatrists who care deeply about the emotional and supportive care needs of patients and families as they cope with cancer and cancer treatment. For more information, please visit our website at <http://cancer.ucsf.edu/psycho-oncology/>, call us at (415) 353-7019, or ask your physician for a referral to see one of our staff.

Notes

For more information or resources, please visit the Psycho-Oncology service website at <http://cancer.ucsf.edu/psycho-oncology/>.

The information in this publication is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace the advice of your physician or health care provider, as each patient's circumstances are individual. We encourage you to discuss with your physician any questions and concerns that you may have. Reviewed by Psycho-Oncology staff members at UCSF Medical Center.

