



Getting Help for Fatigue

Fatigue is an extreme feeling of tiredness or lack of energy, often described as being exhausted. Fatigue is something that lasts even when a person seems to be getting enough sleep.

Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most common 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 may cause fatigue are having and recovering from surgery, low blood counts or low electrolyte (blood chemistry) levels, infection, or changes in hormone levels.

Talking about your fatigue

Feeling weakness or fatigue is common in people with cancer, but it's different for each person. The best way to help your health care team know the type of fatigue you are feeling is from your own report of your own 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.

Describing fatigue

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

- Certain drugs used to treat pain, nausea, or depression can make a person feel tired and sleepy. Talk with your health care team about this. Sometimes changing to a different drug or dose can help.
- Decide which things are the most important to do and focus on those tasks first.

- 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.

Exercise

- Regular, moderate exercise (like walking) – started only with your doctor’s OK – can ease fatigue and help 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

- Avoid caffeine in drinks (like coffee, tea, or soda).
- 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 and drink about 8 to 10 glasses of water a day.

Get good sleep

- Try to sleep 7 to 8 hours each night. Sleep experts tell us that having regular times to go to bed and get up helps us keep a healthy sleep routine.
- 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.
- Sleep therapy can also help you minimize sleep disturbances and learn improved sleep hygiene.

More about managing fatigue

Because fatigue may be caused by more than one problem, doctors, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, pharmacists, dietitians and nutritionists, and a number of specialists might be involved in treating your fatigue. For this reason, your health care team might have you try many different things to help manage your fatigue or work with a palliative care team to address multiple symptoms.



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Yoga, massage therapy, counseling, and dietary or nutritional counseling may be used to help treat fatigue and weakness.

More research is needed and is being done with medication, but certain stimulant or drugs may be prescribed to you if your fatigue doesn’t improve. These stimulants are only prescribed for a short period. It’s important you talk to your doctor about the benefits of taking these drugs, as well as the different side effects that may occur such as daytime sleepiness, withdrawal symptoms, insomnia, memory problems, or allergic reactions.

Also check your medical insurance for coverage on these treatments.

Talk to your health care team.

Tell your health care team about changes with your fatigue. Let them know what you have trouble with or the things that make the you feel worse or better.

Tell your friends or loved ones what they can do to help. You might be able to cope better with their support and understanding.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or visit us online at **www.cancer.org**. We’re here when you need us.

