

# Fatigue

## What is fatigue?

Fatigue is a feeling of tiredness even when getting normal sleep or not having enough energy to do the things you used to do. Fatigue is very common in cancer survivors. Fatigue may be difficult to describe and people describe it in a variety of ways, using terms such as tired, weak, exhausted, weary, worn-out, lack of energy as well as exercise intolerance or lack of stamina to keep going with activities.

Many cancer survivors experience chronic fatigue after their active treatment has ended. Survivors can experience chronic fatigue because of the treatment they received for their cancer, because they have been inactive or because of the different emotions they are feeling in their life after cancer. Chronic fatigue can also be a sign of a recurrence or another medical problem.

Fatigue may influence one's sense of well-being, daily performance, activities of daily living, and relationships with family and friends. Financial resources may become limited as people suffering from fatigue are forced into disability programs or out of a job. Cancer survivors may find it very difficult to maintain health insurance and experience other issues with financial barriers to continue follow-up care or treatment.

## What are the symptoms of fatigue?

Some symptoms of fatigue that survivors might experience include:

- Feeling tired even though you had a good night's sleep
- Feeling sleepy throughout the day
- Feeling sudden, extreme tiredness
- Feeling too weak to stand
- Finding it difficult to start routine activities
- Needing to stop in the middle of activities to rest or not being able to do activities for very long
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability

## What are some of the physical causes of fatigue?

Some of the physical causes of fatigue are:

- Low red blood cell counts (anemia)
- Difficulty breathing
- Changes in how well your heart pumps blood
- Changes in muscle or bone due to surgery or treatment
- Changes in the hormone levels in your body (usually a decrease)

- Changes in your immune function or the way your body responds when your immune system is challenged
- Trouble sleeping
- Symptoms such as pain or numbness in your feet that make it harder to move
- Side effects of medications
- Chronic pain
- Inactivity
- Having other medical conditions

Sometimes the exact cause of your fatigue may be unknown, but that does not mean that you and your health care team can't work together to help manage your fatigue.

## **What are some of the emotional causes of fatigue?**

Some emotional causes of fatigue are:

- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Boredom
- Loss or grief
- Depression
- Depression is a common emotional cause of fatigue. When thinking about the causes of your fatigue, you should also discuss with your health care team any feelings of sadness or depression you may be experiencing.
- Fatigue and depression can both happen during your survivorship, and both are real problems that you should discuss with your health care team. But being tired does not necessarily mean a survivor is depressed. Sometimes survivors hear things like, "You're not tired - you're just depressed." While depression may be one cause of fatigue, it's important that you discuss all possible physical and emotional causes with your health care team.

## **When is a cancer survivor likely to experience fatigue?**

Many people think that fatigue is something that survivors will only experience during treatment. This is not true. Some survivors experience fatigue months or years after completing active treatment.

A type of fatigue called post-cancer fatigue affects some survivors after their active treatment has ended. If you have experienced symptoms of fatigue and have worked with your health care team to rule out any other causes, you might be experiencing post-cancer fatigue.

Post-cancer fatigue is different from chronic fatigue syndrome, a disease that people without cancer can get. With post-cancer fatigue, the cause - treatment for cancer - is known. Not enough research has been done to know a lot about the exact causes of post-cancer fatigue. But it exists, and you can discuss it with your health care team.

## **Patient education - what every survivor with fatigue should know:**

- The difference between fatigue and depression
- To observe their rest and activity patterns during the day and over time
- To engage in attention-restoring activities (walking, gardening, bird-watching)
- To identify activities which cause fatigue and develop ways to avoid or modify those activities
- To Pace: schedule important daily activities during times of less fatigue, and plan rest between major activities.
- To cancel unimportant activities that cause stress or fatigue.
- To identify environmental or activity changes that may help decrease fatigue
- The importance of eating enough food and drinking enough fluids
- Physical therapy may help with nerve or muscle weakness
- To avoid or change a situation that causes stress
- To observe whether treatments being used to help fatigue are working
- Most Important: To develop an exercise program that is realistic but will build strength and stamina. This is proven to reduce fatigue in cancer survivors.

## **Practical Everyday Suggestions**

### **Maintain a comfortable balance between activity and rest:**

- ✓ Keep a list of your activities and how much rest you get.
- ✓ Keep track of situations that make you feel more tired such as sitting down for too long, being in a room that is too warm, traveling across time zones, or having to concentrate for a long period of time. Planning ahead may help you adjust these activities.
- ✓ Pace: Find ways to break up your activities into shorter time periods, or allow yourself time to rest between activities.

### **Try to find balance with a healthy lifestyle:**

- ✓ Do not use tobacco products.
- ✓ Work with your health care team to develop an exercise plan.
- ✓ Maintain a healthy body weight.
- ✓ Work with your health care team to develop a diet that includes the right amounts of fruits, vegetables, protein, carbohydrates and fat.
- ✓ A well-balanced diet is important. A normal, healthy diet consists of protein, carbohydrates, some fat, fiber, vitamins and minerals. If you unintentionally gain or lose weight, ask your health care provider to refer you to a dietitian or nutritionist to evaluate your nutrition.

**Pay attention to your sleep habits:**

- ✓ Keep a sleep diary to track your sleep habits.
- ✓ Some items to write down in a sleep diary are:
- ✓ The time you turn out the light to go to sleep
- ✓ When you wake up and why you awakened (noise, pain, to take medication, to go to the bathroom, etc.)
- ✓ The time you get out of bed in the morning
- ✓ Naps you take during the day
- ✓ This information can help you and your health care team decide if sleep problems play a role in your fatigue.
- ✓ Other suggestions to improve sleep quality include:
- ✓ Sleep in a comfortable bed.
- ✓ Use your bedroom only for sleeping so your body thinks sleep when it is there.
- ✓ Avoid sleeping on the sofa or in a chair.
- ✓ Sleep with the lights out in a quiet room.
- ✓ Wear comfortable sleep garments.
- ✓ Avoid heavy meals, food or drinks containing caffeine or alcohol, and intense exercise prior to bedtime.
- ✓ Go to bed at the same time each night. Best sleep occurs before midnight.
- ✓ Limit night time stimulation before bed.
- ✓ If you are lying in bed awake for more than 30 minutes, get up and read a book or other quiet activity until you feel sleepy.
- ✓ Discuss difficulty sleeping with your health care team.

\*\*In some instances, medications can help reduce fatigue. Your healthcare provider can help you determine if this is appropriate for you.

## Resources

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship (NCCS)

[www.canceradvocacy.org](http://www.canceradvocacy.org)

**Email:** [info@canceradvocacy.org](mailto:info@canceradvocacy.org) <<mailto:info@canceradvocacy.org>>

**Phone:** 1-877-NCCS-YES (1-877-622-7937) An information specialist is available from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (EST).

### Books

After Cancer: A Guide to Your New Life. Author: Wendy S Harpham, MD

Publication: Harper perennial, 1995

A Cancer Survivor's Almanac: Charting Your Journey. Author: Barbara Hoffman, NCCS, 2004.

### Works Cited

Lance Armstrong Foundation Survivorship Topics

[www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org)

Harpham, Wendy. After Cancer, A Guide to Your New Life. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.