

Understanding Fatigue and Cancer

A guide for people affected by cancer

Cancer and cancer treatments often make people very tired. This is called cancer-related fatigue. This fact sheet explains more about this fatigue and how it can be managed.

What is cancer-related fatigue?

Fatigue is when you feel very tired, weak, drained and worn out. You may have low or no energy, or feel run down or exhausted. Cancer-related fatigue is worse or more intense than normal tiredness. It isn't caused by physical or mental activity and usually won't go away with rest or sleep. This fatigue can go on for some time and affect what you can do.

Who gets cancer-related fatigue?

Research shows that most people with cancer experience some fatigue. This can happen before, during and after cancer treatment. Some people may feel fatigue for months or years after treatment ends.

People at higher risk of cancer-related fatigue include those who have depression, anxiety, sleep issues or other health conditions; who don't do much exercise; or who have had fatigue before they had cancer.

Cancer-related fatigue may be mild, moderate or severe. It can vary depending on the cancer type, stage, how long your treatment lasts, and your age. It may be worse if you have more than one treatment or if the cancer has advanced.

What are the symptoms?

Fatigue affects people with cancer in different ways. Symptoms of fatigue may vary as the cancer changes, or due to different stages of treatment. They can also change over a day or week.

Fatigue is rarely just a single issue – it often happens along with pain, emotional distress, low red blood cell count (anaemia) and sleep issues.

People with cancer-related fatigue may notice some or all of the following symptoms:

- having little or no energy
- feeling mentally or emotionally exhausted
- muscle aches and pains
- finding it hard to move, or feeling heavy or slow
- feeling weak all over
- having trouble thinking clearly or concentrating
- difficulty doing daily tasks such as getting dressed, showering and cooking
- having trouble sleeping
- not enjoying their usual activities
- feelings of sadness or irritability.

Cancer-related fatigue can affect your daily life, work, relationships, sex life and social life. But there are ways to help manage it (see pages 2–3).

What causes fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue usually has more than one cause, including:

- the cancer itself or treatments (e.g. chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy)
- medicines, including for pain relief
- symptoms of cancer or side effects of cancer treatment, such as low red blood cells (anaemia), nausea, bowel issues or pain
- changes to blood and hormone levels
- not eating well, or your body not getting enough nourishment from the food you eat
- stress and mood changes (e.g. anxiety)
- not sleeping well
- a lack of physical activity
- other health problems, such as infection, diabetes, arthritis and heart conditions.

How is fatigue diagnosed?

To work out if you have fatigue, your healthcare team will ask some questions. Your doctor or nurse may use a screening questionnaire (a list of questions) to find out how cancer-related fatigue is affecting you. These questionnaires ask when the fatigue started, how long it's lasted, whether it has changed over time, and how it's affecting your daily life.

You may have several tests to find out what might be contributing to the fatigue. These may include blood tests to check your red blood cell count, hormone levels, and kidney and liver function; urine tests; and heart function tests.

If the results show that conditions like anaemia or low levels of some hormones are contributing to the fatigue, these can be treated. You may need a referral to a specialist or a fatigue clinic (if available).

How long does fatigue last?

Cancer-related fatigue can last throughout treatment and for some time after it is finished. Energy levels usually improve over time.

Most people find they feel better 6–12 months after treatment ends. For some people, cancer-related fatigue can continue for years.

► If you have advanced cancer, see our *Living with Advanced Cancer* booklet.

Managing fatigue

The first step in managing fatigue is working out how it affects you. Use a scale to rate your fatigue from 1–10; the higher the number, the worse the fatigue.

Keep a record of your fatigue level at different times of the day, as well as anything you try and whether it helped. This can help you to understand how you feel day to day.

Talk to your general practitioner (GP); oncologist, haematologist or nurse; or an allied health professional like an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist. Tell them how you feel, and how long you've had fatigue.

Your doctor will manage any health conditions, medicines or symptoms that may be causing or contributing to the fatigue. For example, if your red blood cell count is low (anaemia), you may be prescribed medicines or have a blood transfusion. If pain is making fatigue worse, your pain medicine may need to be changed or adjusted.

Your doctor may also suggest trying medicines that are being studied to help people with cancer-related fatigue, including certain steroids for people with advanced cancer.

The next page has practical suggestions that may help you manage fatigue when you have cancer.

Ways that cancer-related fatigue can affect you

Some people say that fatigue is the most difficult side effect of cancer and its treatment. Sometimes, people might look well but still have severe fatigue. Fatigue can make it hard to do everyday things, which can make you feel frustrated, upset and isolated. If you have continued feelings of sadness, talk to your doctor. You may have low mood or depression, and treatment may help.

Your family and friends may not fully understand how cancer-related fatigue affects what you are able to do. They may expect you to do the same things you did before the cancer diagnosis, and not know that some side effects continue for a long time. It's natural for them to want the distress and disruption of cancer

to go away. If you find their reactions difficult to handle, explaining how fatigue is affecting you might help them to understand. You can also give them this fact sheet – knowing more about cancer-related fatigue may help them understand what you're experiencing.

If you took time off work for treatment, talk to your employer about returning to work. Australian laws require an employer to take reasonable steps to accommodate the effects of an employee's illness. This may mean, for example, that your employer allows you to return to work in stages, is flexible with your start and finish times, and gives you time to rest during the day.

Ways to manage fatigue during and after treatment

Make time to move



- Studies show that doing exercise can improve cancer-related fatigue, both during treatment and afterwards.¹⁻³
- Ask your doctor what exercise is safe for you. An accredited exercise physiologist (essa.org.au/find-aep) or a qualified physiotherapist (choose physio/find-a-physio) can make a program for you.
- Start slowly. Gradually increase your activity as fatigue improves. Work towards 30 minutes of moderate or harder activity (e.g. swimming or fast walking) most days.
- Try to do things that help mobility, balance and coordination (e.g. hanging out clothes or gardening) at least 3 days a week.
- Aim for 2 muscle-training activities (e.g. weights or resistance bands) a week.
- Gentle yoga may help with fatigue, sleep and stress.
- ▶ Find step-by-step exercises in our *Exercise for People Living with Cancer* booklet and exercise videos at cancercouncil.com.au/exercise.

Seek some support



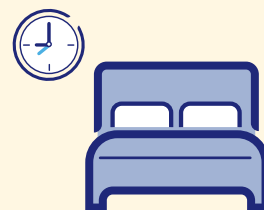
- Studies show that cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) can help manage fatigue during and after treatment. Ask your GP about programs near you, or who may be best to help you with this.
- Accept offers of help or ask family, friends or neighbours to help with household chores, cooking or gardening.
- Your local council or social worker can put you in touch with services for help at home (such as house cleaning, meals or shopping). Some are free, while others have a cost.
- Talk to your healthcare team about how you are feeling. They can assess if you have depression. Counselling or medicine, even for a short time, may be helpful.
- Connect with a support group, either in person, over the phone or online.
- Speak to your employer about changes they can make to support you.

Try therapies that help



- Before trying any complementary therapies, ask your healthcare team whether they may be helpful and safe for you. Studies show doing tai chi, qi gong or taking American ginseng may help during treatment.³ After treatment, yoga, acupressure and moxibustion (a traditional Chinese therapy that burns herbs near the skin) may improve fatigue.³
- There is some evidence that acupuncture may reduce cancer-related fatigue. Find a registered acupuncturist who treats people with cancer at chinesemedicineboard.gov.au.
- Relaxation and meditation techniques can help reduce stress. Listen to our podcast series *Finding Calm During Cancer*.
- For general health, eat well and stay hydrated. A dietitian can give you suggestions – find one at dietitiansaustralia.org.au.
- ▶ See our *Nutrition for People Living with Cancer* and *Understanding Complementary Therapies* booklets.

Set up a sleep routine



- Pace your activities, take regular short breaks, and rest when you need to.
- Prioritise activities that you enjoy or give you a sense of achievement.
- Get a referral to an occupational therapist or physiotherapist for tips on how to save energy.
- Aim for 7–9 hours sleep each night. Or 7–8 hours if you are aged 65 or over. Only have short naps (sleeps) during the day.
- Try to go to bed and get up at the same time. Have a bedtime routine that includes activities such as meditation.
- Avoid screen time (e.g. mobile phones or tablets) at night.
- Get some natural light during the day – especially in the morning.
- Avoid drinking alcohol and smoking – this can affect how well you sleep.
- If you're unable to fall asleep, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy.
- If you're still not sleeping well, talk to your doctor.



The costs for seeing an exercise physiologist, physiotherapist, dietitian or occupational therapist vary. If your doctor refers you as part of a GP chronic condition management plan, you may be eligible for a Medicare rebate for up to 5 visits per calendar year. If you have private health insurance, your insurer may cover some of the costs.

“I had to accept that I was dealing with fatigue and celebrate small improvements. I had to be careful not to overdo it and whatever help people offered, I took. That was very challenging for me but it helped.” SUSAN

Question checklist

Try this checklist for questions to ask your doctor.

- What is causing the fatigue? Do I need a blood test to find out what is contributing to the fatigue?
- What can I do to reduce or manage the fatigue?
- Is there anything that I should avoid doing?
- What can help me to sleep better?
- How long is the fatigue likely to last?
- Can a social worker talk to me about home help?
- What exercise or activity do you recommend?
- Can you refer me to an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist who works with people with cancer-related fatigue?
- Can you refer me to someone who can provide CBT or mindfulness interventions?
- Are there fatigue clinics or local group programs that I can attend?
- Are there complementary therapies that may help?

References

1. National Comprehensive Cancer Network (US), *NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology, Cancer-Related Fatigue*, v.2.2023.

2. A Fabi et al., “Cancer-related fatigue: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis and treatment”, *Annals of Oncology*, vol. 31, iss. 6, 2020, pp. 713–23.

3. J. E. Bower et al., “Management of fatigue in adult survivors of cancer: ASCO–Society for Integrative Oncology Guideline Update”, *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, vol. 42, May 2024.

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Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Connect on 13 11 20 or visit the website for more information about cancer and health care. Qualified professionals can listen to your concerns, put you in touch with local services and send you free copies of our booklets. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website.

Cancer Connect	cancerconnect.org.au
ACT	actcancer.org
NSW	cancercouncil.com.au
NT	cancer.org.au/nt
QLD	cancerqld.org.au
SA	cancersa.org.au
TAS	cancer.org.au/tas
VIC	cancervic.org.au
WA	cancerwa.asn.au
Australia	cancer.org.au

Other useful websites

You can find many useful resources online, but not all websites are reliable. The below websites are good sources of support and information.

American Cancer Society	cancer.org
Cancer Council podcasts	cancercouncil.com.au/podcasts
Cancer Research UK	cancerresearchuk.org
Macmillan Cancer Support (UK)	macmillan.org.uk

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.

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