



Adapting to Cancer-Related Fatigue



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Introduction to Fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue (CRF) is very common in people who have a blood cancer. It is often said to be the most common and distressing symptom reported by cancer survivors, due to its impact on daily functioning and daily quality of life.

CRF is characterized by excessive and persistent exhaustion that can interfere with daily activity and function. CRF often begins before cancer is diagnosed, may worsen during treatment, and can sometimes persist for months or even years after treatment ends. Fatigue is a subjective experience and the assessment of fatigue relies on your

self-report of its intensity and how much it interferes with your daily life.

When effects of CRF are present, they can range in severity from mild to severe. Some effects may be short-term and intermittent, whereas others may linger for months to years after cancer and cancer treatment. It is important to talk with your medical team to plan treatment and follow-up care.

Causes of Fatigue

Fatigue is a symptom that is associated with many blood cancers and blood cancer treatments. A person who receives chemotherapy or other anticancer drugs, radiation therapy,



and/or stem cell transplantation generally experiences some degree of fatigue. Although CRF typically lessens in the months following treatment, it can become an ongoing problem.

The risk for developing cancer-related fatigue may be influenced by your diagnosis, treatment, age, gender, and overall health.

While there is no standard treatment for CRF, the first step is often to identify and treat any underlying causes of CRF (for example, anemia or poor nutrition) and any other contributing health problems. The causes can be multi-factorial and the exact causes can be difficult to identify. Problems such as heart, liver or kidney disease, pain, depression, and anxiety may intensify CRF.

Symptoms and Signs of Fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue may interfere with your ability to fulfill daily responsibilities and to enjoy life. It is a health problem that requires appropriate medical intervention and self-management.

Some general symptoms of CRF may include:

- Feeling very tired
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Physical weakness
- Changes in mood or motivation

Signs of physical fatigue that may be evident from a medical history and physical examination:

- Difficulty climbing stairs or walking short distances
- Shortness of breath
- Anemia
- Weight gain or loss
- Intolerance to cold
- Changes to hair or skin
- Sleep disturbance or insomnia
- Pain
- Muscle weakness
- Loss of sexual desire

Fatigue can also be reflected in mood, cognition and social changes:

- Feeling depressed or anxious
- Lack of motivation
- Negative thinking
- Inability to concentrate
- Clumsiness
- Loss of memory or mental alertness
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Unusual strain in relationships

Assessment and Treatment for Fatigue

Most side effects go away when treatment is over. However, some side effects can last after treatment ends.

Assessing fatigue can be a challenge for a number of reasons, and good communication with your healthcare team is key. Your doctor might prescribe medications or suggest other ways to help ease side effects.

Assessing CRF can be challenging because:

- Fatigue can fluctuate throughout the day and between treatments.
- Distinguishing fatigue from other problems (for example, anemia, depression, anxiety) may be difficult.
- Survivors or people in treatment sometimes believe fatigue is an inevitable part of cancer treatment and do not mention it to their doctor.

Drugs that relieve certain treatment side effects, such as nausea or loss of appetite, may improve sleep and nutrition and, as a result, ease fatigue. However, a combination of drug and non-drug treatments is often recommended.

A number of traditional therapies are available that may help restore energy, such as:

- Movement
- Psychological support
- Nutritional and dietary assessment
- Stress management
- Improved sleep habits

Many people use complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies to help cope with side effects of treatment:

- Support groups
- Mind-body medicine (meditation, yoga, acupuncture)
- Music therapy
- Manipulative and body-based practices (osteopathy, reflexology, massage therapy)
- Movement therapies (Pilates, Trager psychophysical integration)
- Whole medical systems (Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, homeopathy)

Talk with your healthcare team if you are interested in CAM therapies. Because many of these treatments are not rigorously tested, these therapies may be neither safe nor effective. Talk to your doctor to determine if any CAM therapies are right for you.

Living Well With Fatigue

Tell others

Help manage fatigue by telling family, friends, coworkers and your healthcare team about it. Let them know what you are going through. Ask for help. Seek out loved ones who can help you with routine tasks such as shopping, cooking, housekeeping, laundry, or driving.

Tell your doctor

If fatigue causes difficulties at work, at home, or in social situations talk with your doctor to try and establish what you can do. This is especially important if you have fatigue that lasts more than a year and keeps causing issues in your daily life.

Take care of yourself

Try some of these suggestions to deal with your fatigue:

- **Be flexible.** Don't measure your energy against how you felt before you were diagnosed. Set realistic goals.
- **Stay active.** Staying physically fit may help ease fatigue. Focus on activities that will help you gradually build strength but won't deplete your energy level.
- **Practice good nutrition.** People with cancer are at risk for malnutrition and other problems resulting from either the cancer or treatment side effects. Eat a balanced diet that provides sufficient calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals- especially iron.

- **Manage stress.** Stress can zap your energy. Try to relieve its effects with exercise, relaxation techniques, meditation, spiritual or religious practices, socializing and counselling.
- **Address sleep habits.**
- **Keep a journal.** Track your fatigue and review your journal entries with your doctor to determine possible causes, treatment, and coping strategies.
- **Stay positive.** Make a list of things that make you feel good. Include activities you can do right now and plan activities you can do in the future.
- **Seek support.** You are not alone, and many people find support groups to be a great comfort.
- **Delegate tasks.** Delegate tasks that drain energy in order to save energy for things that you enjoy doing or will benefit your care.

Keeping your body moving is the best way to improve energy. Some people find it helpful to have an exercise program, or to talk with their doctor to get an “exercise prescription.”

You may choose to join a formal exercise program, which may be offered through a local organization (for example, Alberta Cancer Exercise in Alberta or Wellspring in Alberta, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Prince Edward Island). Alternatively, you may choose to design a program for yourself. Having a program helps you to hold yourself accountable to following your exercise routine to help push through the fatigue.

Experts recommend that cancer survivors aim to complete 30-minute sessions of aerobic and resistance exercise three times per week.

<https://www.albertacancerexercise.com/>

<https://www.cancer.org/health-care-professionals/american-cancer-society-prevention-early-detection-guidelines/nupa-guidelines-for-cancer-survivors.html>

<https://csepguidelines.ca/>

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