COPING WITH CANCER RELATED FATIGUE
Estimates are that more than 50 percent of people who have cancer experience cancer-related fatigue (CRF). It is often said to be the most common and distressing symptom reported by people living with cancer, due to its impact on daily functioning and quality of life.

CRF is characterized by excessive and persistent exhaustion that interferes with daily activity and function. CRF often begins before cancer is diagnosed, worsens during the course of treatment, and may persist for months—even years—after treatment ends. Fatigue is a subjective experience and the assessment of fatigue relies on the patient’s self-report of its intensity and how much it interferes with daily life.

Many patients with leukemia, Hodgkin lymphoma, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, myeloma or myeloproliferative diseases find CRF to be more distressing and disabling than other cancer-related symptoms such as pain, depression and nausea.

When effects are present, they can range from mild to severe and can linger for months or years after therapy. It is important to talk with your medical team to plan treatment and follow-up care.

Estimates are that more than 50% of people who have cancer experience cancer-related fatigue (CRF).
Fatigue is a side effect associated with a number of blood cancer therapies. A person who receives chemotherapy or other anticancer drugs, radiation therapy, and/or stem cell transplantation generally experiences some degree of fatigue. CRF typically lessens in the months following treatment, but may be an ongoing problem.

The risk for developing cancer related fatigue may be influenced by:

- The type and duration of treatment
- The patient’s age at the time of treatment
- The patient’s gender
- The patient’s overall health
- The type of disease and the disease itself

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 are not known. Problems such as heart, liver or kidney disease, pain, depression and anxiety may intensify CRF or insomnia.

CRF typically recedes in the months following treatment, but may be an ongoing problem.
Cancer related fatigue interferes with a person’s ability to fulfill daily responsibilities and to enjoy life. It is a health problem that requires appropriate medical and self-management of fatigue from the patient.

Some general symptoms of CRF may include:

- Feeling very tired
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Physical weakness
- Changes in mood or motivation
- Irritability and impaired ability to perform daily activities, concentrate or make decisions

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 and/or anxious mood
- Lack of motivation
- Negative thinking
- Inability to concentrate
- Clumsiness
- Loss of memory or mental alertness
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Unusual strain in relationships
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 patient-doctor communication is key to successful evaluation. Your doctor might prescribe medicine 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
- Many patients believe fatigue is an inevitable part of cancer treatment and do not mention it to their doctor
- Some patients may worry that addressing their fatigue could distract the doctor from treating the cancer, or they may worry that their fatigue is a sign of disease progression or a recurrence

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 in a person who has a blood cancer. These therapies include:

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

*Pharmacological measures to treat fatigue show limited effects but medication to treat contributing factors such as anemia or thyroid problems is critical and for management of symptoms that worsen fatigue such as pain, sleep disturbances, depression.
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 about any CAM therapies you are using or thinking about using. Many CAM therapies have not been studied. These therapies may be neither safe nor effective. Your doctor can give you more information.
Coping with Fatigue

Tell others

Help manage fatigue by telling family, friends, coworkers and your health care 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 trouble at work, at home, or in social situations talk with your doctor to try and establish what can be done about it. This is especially important for people with fatigue that lasts more than a year and keeps causing trouble in their daily lives.

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 counseling.

• Address sleep habits.

• Plan your treatment schedule. Schedule treatment for times when it will have the least impact on your job or other activities.

• Keep a journal. Track your fatigue and review your journal entries with your doctor to help him or her determine possible causes, recommend treatment and suggest 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.** Many patients and their families find support groups to be comforting and informative.

---

**CITATIONS**

Manage cancer related fatigue: For People Affected by Cancer.

Canadian Partnership Against Cancer and the Canadian chapter of the Cancer Patient Education Network

Howell D, Keshavarz H, Broadfield L, et al. A Pan Canadian Practice Guideline for Screening, Assessment, and Management of Cancer-Related Fatigue in Adults

Cancer-Related Fatigue. The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society Website.

http://www.lls.org/treatment/managing-side-effects/cancer-related-fatigue

Updated 07.01.2009
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LLSC gratefully acknowledges Dr. Doris Howell, RN, PhD for her review of this booklet and her important contributions to the material presented in this publication.

This booklet was produced with the generous donation of The Rotman Family Foundation.

THE ROTMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION
Information Resource Centre:

Have a question or looking for resources to help you through your diagnosis, treatment or survivorship? Get one-on-one help from a trained specialist.

Our team of master's level oncology specialists are available by phone:

Monday - Friday
9:00am to 9:00pm EST
1-800-955-4572