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# CANCER FATIGUE

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"For some patients, treating fatigue may be as important as treating the disease."

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## **What is cancer fatigue?**

Cancer fatigue has long been a catchall phrase for everything from mild tiredness to complete exhaustion. Cancer patients often describe the experience as a total lack of energy or feeling "bone tired." This type of fatigue is not only physical; it can impact social, psychological, and spiritual functioning as well.

## **What causes cancer fatigue?**

There are many causes of cancer fatigue. The disease itself is often responsible, and any of the three standard treatments for cancer--surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation--may be a source of fatigue. Emotional fatigue can also occur, because the stress of living with a cancer diagnosis can lead to feelings of despair, depression, helplessness, and futility. Cancer pain and physical discomfort can cause fatigue. Your age, physical conditioning, and lifestyle also contribute to how you experience cancer fatigue.

## **What are the effects of cancer fatigue?**

The effects of cancer fatigue vary from person to person. Some people become totally exhausted, while others experience short bouts of fatigue or infrequent fatigue. For some patients, fatigue is only a mild inconvenience, but for others, it is difficult to get out of bed or walk up a flight of stairs. Fatigue may also cause shortness of breath, depress appetite, and affect thought processes; it may affect a person's ability to work or make it necessary to shorten work hours. Being aware of some of the possible side effects of cancer fatigue can lead to better coping strategies. Family roles may change depending on a person's ability to parent, handle chores, drive, or maintain intimacy with a loved one. Cancer fatigue can affect a person's ability to concentrate, think clearly, retain information, and make decisions, which, in turn, can lead to depression and anxiety, which can increase physical and emotional fatigue in a seemingly never-ending cycle. Communicating with health-care providers and loved ones can lessen feelings of frustration, reduced self-esteem, and isolation as well as decrease the likelihood of interference with treatment or the outcome of care.

### **How long can cancer fatigue last?**

People experience fatigue in different ways and for different lengths of time. Fatigue can last for days, weeks, or months. Some people seem to experience "post-cancer fatigue." This term describes the lack of energy or complete exhaustion that can persist to varying degrees for years.

### **Do low blood counts affect fatigue?**

Generally the answer is yes, but this is a discussion to have with your doctor. Low blood counts can compromise your ability to continue treatment or have it be very effective. Working in conjunction with your healthcare team, you may find that you can benefit from products designed to treat and increase low blood counts.

### **Will I necessarily experience this type of fatigue?**

A national survey released in 1997, found cancer fatigue to be "the most common side effect of cancer and its treatment." Earlier studies and surveys report that "78% - 96% of patients receiving chemotherapy experience fatigue." Patients undergoing radiation therapy often experience cumulative fatigue, regardless of treatment site.

### **If it is so common, should I even mention it to my doctor?**

Yes! Fortunately, the significance of cancer fatigue on quality of life is now being recognized and researched. It is important to discuss your fatigue with your health-care team so that your fatigue and its effects can be minimized when possible.

### **Fatigue is so personal. How do I describe it to my doctor?**

Fatigue is difficult to measure, but because fatigue can impact your life from hour to hour, day-to-day, and week-to-week, it is important to recognize it and accurately describe it. Monitor and document your fatigue in writing and communicate this information to your doctor and nurse; try using a scale from one to ten to describe your level of fatigue to your doctor; note when your energy levels are highest and lowest, and prioritize activities. In this way you can work together to find the most effective treatment plan.

### **What can I, or my doctor do to improve this condition?**

There are several things that you can do on your own and with your doctor. Ask your healthcare team about vitamin and mineral supplements, prescription drugs, exercise and nutrition; try varying your eating and sleeping patterns; ask for a referral to a mental health specialist, physical therapist, and/or nutritionist who works with cancer patients; join a support group; try to find interests or activities that are nourishing, such as meditation or relaxation techniques; educate yourself about the subject of cancer fatigue and the research being done so that you will feel more in control. ###