

CANCER – RELATED FATIGUE

Fatigue is the most common side effect of cancer treatment and is different from everyday tiredness. It can occur suddenly and unlike everyday tiredness, it is not necessarily brought on by exercise or a long day's activity. Resting does not always help relieve the fatigue that can be overwhelming and can touch many parts of your life. Up to 78% of all cancer patients experience fatigue at some point.¹

WHAT CAUSES IT?

There are at least 6 possible causes of cancer-related fatigue:

- Anaemia caused by cancer treatment. This means there are fewer red blood cells to carry oxygen through your body.
- Depression.
- Nausea and vomiting due to cancer treatments can be very debilitating
- Inadequate nutrition due to treatment side effects and an altered sense of taste and smell.
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Changes in activity levels

HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Different people experience different symptoms. People with cancer treatment-related fatigue describe feeling weak, exhausted, sleepy, breathless, drowsy, weary, confused or impatient. Some people feel they just cannot move because of heavy or sore limbs. Feelings of physical, emotional and/or mental exhaustion are common, as well as problems concentrating. For many people cancer treatment-related fatigue is unlike anything they have experienced.

TIPS TO HELP DEAL WITH FATIGUE

Rest and sleep

- Both are important, but within limits. Too much rest can actually decrease your energy level.
- Plan your day to have time to rest. Take short naps rather than a long sleep during day.
- Follow a nap with an activity or quick exercise. Take a short walk
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and sugar before bed to ensure a good night's sleep.

¹ Fatigue & cancer. 2005. University of Texas. MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Nutrition

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat frequent small meals (rather than three large meals)
- Eat complex carbohydrates (whole grain breads and cereals, pasta, fruits and vegetables)
- Eat iron-rich foods to help prevent anaemia (red meat, grains, leafy green vegetables, beans)
- Limit simple sugar intake (lollies, desserts etc)

Exercise

- Exercise will keep you stronger and improve your sense of well-being.
- If you are not used to exercise, perhaps start with a gentle walking program
- Be sure to check with your doctor before beginning any exercise program

Energy Conservation

- Avoid excessive bending, reaching, carrying and lifting.
- **Bathing** – sit down to bathe and dry yourself. Long hot showers and baths could make you feel more tired. Install rails and handles where you need them.
- **Dressing** – Plan what you will wear. Sit down to avoid bending from a standing position. Wear comfortable clothes and low-heeled shoes.
- Let family and friends help with **housework and gardening**. Schedule household tasks over the week. Lower your standards for a while!
- **Shopping** – Use a shopping trolley rather than a basket. Shop at less busy times or order from home. Ask for help when carrying groceries.
- **Prepare meals** you don't need to toil over, like frozen and pre-prepared meals. When you are feeling well, make extra portions that you can freeze.
- Arrange **childcare** so you have regular rest times on your own. Encourage games where you can sit (drawing, board games, reading).
- If fatigue is making your **work** difficult, discuss modifying your duties or hours with your employer. If you can, consider taking leave.

Other Suggestions

- Set small manageable goals. Aim for major activities only when your fatigue is lessening.
- Try to do things that make you happy. .
- Do things you need and want to do. If you have people around you who are able and willing, let them take on some of your usual activities.
- Avoid stress where possible: relaxing and exercise can help to reduce unavoidable stresses

How long will the fatigue last?

You may continue to feel tired for a time after the cancer treatment ends, but this should gradually go away after treatment is over. If you continue to feel tired after a few months, let your doctor know.

Acknowledgement: The Cancer Council Victoria; The Cancer Council NSW & MD Anderson Cancer Centre for material used in this Information Sheet