



# Dealing with cancer-related fatigue

Fatigue is common among people who have completed cancer treatment and people receiving ongoing therapy.

*This fact sheet explains ways to cope with cancer-related fatigue.*

## What is cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is 'a distressing, persistent, subjective sense of tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer or cancer treatment that is not proportional to recent activity and interferes with usual functioning'. It is different from normal tiredness, such as the tiredness you feel after a long day of work. It is usually not relieved by rest.

Most patients who have had cancer treatment have fatigue, either for a short while or for months or even years after treatment has ended.

Fatigue touches people's personal, social and working lives. It affects your quality of life. Survivors who have cancer-related fatigue often describe it as one of the most distressing side effects of cancer treatment.

Fatigue can be a result of cancer treatment. It can also result from pain, anxiety, disturbed sleep, depression, anaemia (low blood cells), medications and other illnesses and conditions. Medications such as beta-blockers (used for heart conditions and high blood pressure), narcotics (for pain relief), anti-depressants and other drugs may add to fatigue. Heart, lung and kidney disease and other conditions can also cause fatigue.

Using alcohol and drugs like marijuana may make cancer-related fatigue worse.

Fatigue can be managed.

## What your doctor can do about cancer-related fatigue

- First, fatigue needs to be identified and treated.
- Your doctor may suggest using a questionnaire to assess how bad your fatigue is and how it is affecting you in your everyday life.
- Your doctor will consider different factors that may be causing your fatigue, such as some medications, diseases or conditions. Your doctor may change the dose of some

medications to see if this reduces your fatigue.

- Your doctor may refer you to a health professional who has experience in caring for people with cancer-related fatigue.

### Key messages in dealing with cancer-related fatigue

- Fatigue needs to be identified and treated.
- Speak with your doctor or healthcare team if fatigue is concerning you.
- There is evidence that moderate-intensity exercise can help reduce cancer-related fatigue.
- Eating a balanced diet will help.
- Manage your energy levels: use the '3Ps': 'plan, prioritise and pace'.
- Healthcare professionals can offer specialist support.
- There are community and hospital-based forums that can give you more information about exercise, managing fatigue and improving nutrition.



## Cancer-related fatigue



### Are your family or friends worried about your fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue affects the person with cancer and their family and friends. Not understanding cancer-related fatigue can lead to communication problems, resentment and feelings of guilt within the family or with friends. Talk to your doctor if you are having problems communicating with your family.

Your doctor can explain to your family or friends:

- that fatigue is a common effect of cancer treatment
- what's been suggested to help
- ways friends and family can be of help
- services that may be of help for them, such as counselling.

### What can I do about cancer-related fatigue?

If you have distressing tiredness or exhaustion, talk to your doctor and describe how it is affecting you. If you find that your mood is low and continues to be low most of the time, you may have depression. If you have lowered mood or feel sad, talk to your doctor.

For some people, some changes will be easier to make than others. Let your doctor know if you require more professional assistance in managing your fatigue.

It is important to remember that some people may require a combination of



efforts to help improve cancer-related fatigue, while others may only require one.

Here are some more ideas for helping to reduce cancer-related fatigue.

### How can exercise help?

Evidence proves that moderate-intensity exercise improves cancer-related fatigue. 'Moderate intensity' means the level of effort needed to noticeably increase your heart rate and/or breathing.

This type of exercise helps people with cancer both during and following cancer treatment and has been shown to:

- reduce the severity of fatigue
- improve mood
- reduce anxiety and help with depression

- increase tolerance for day-to-day activities, including returning to work, family commitments and household activities
- enhance body image and self-esteem.

Brisk walking, swimming and cycling are recommended. These are safe, manageable and suitable for those who have reduced physical fitness following treatment. These types of activities exercise the large muscle groups, which helps to reduce fatigue.

It is recommended that you gradually increase the amount of exercise you do to 30 minutes three to five days per week, depending on your fitness, your physical state and the stage of your treatment or recovery.

Exercise if you are able to and if your doctor says it is safe. Before starting any exercise program, you should be assessed by a health professional. Your doctor will tell you which health



## Cancer-related fatigue



professional can help you start or maintain an activity program. Depending on your particular needs, you may be referred to a physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or an occupational therapist. Each of these health professionals can provide assessment, diagnosis and treatment plans to help you safely increase your activity levels. Follow the guidelines they give you so you exercise safely and effectively – and enjoy it!

For further information or to find a therapist in your area:

### Find an exercise physiologist

<https://www.essa.org.au/find-aep/>

### Find an occupational therapist

<https://www.otaus.com.au/find-an-occupational-therapist>

### Find a physiotherapist

<https://www.physiotherapy.asn.au/APAWCM/Controls/FindAPhysio.aspx>

## How can I manage my energy levels?

'Plan, prioritise and pace' yourself if you are trying to overcome cancer fatigue: we refer to this as the '3Ps'.

Here are some examples of what you can do to manage your energy levels:

- Work out when you have the most energy and prioritise the most important activities or work to do first.
- Set yourself realistic goals and don't be too ambitious.
- Break tasks into manageable chunks of time.
- Plan regular rest breaks: short rests planned throughout the day are better than long ones. Try not to sleep during these rests or it may mean you don't sleep as well at night.

- Give tasks to other people where you can so that you can use your energy for the tasks that only you can do or the things you most enjoy.

It might help to visualise your energy as an energy 'bank': rests are 'deposits' and jobs and activities are 'withdrawals'.

It may be tempting to overdo things as soon as you have built up some energy in your 'bank' but then you might drain your energy reserves completely, leaving you exhausted. This kind of 'boom-bust' cycle can make your fatigue worse.

*Adapted from Lymphoma Association UK Fatigue webpage*

### Good nutrition

Eating a well-balanced diet will help you feel better and may help to reduce feelings of fatigue.





## Cancer-related fatigue



Talking with a dietitian may be helpful if your fatigue is not getting better. They can check that you are eating a nutritionally balanced diet. They can also advise if you need to eat more if you are exercising more. You may wish to ask your doctor for a referral to a dietitian.

For further information about healthy eating or to find a dietitian in your area:

### Find a dietitian

<http://daa.asn.au/for-the-public/find-an-apd/>

### Education and information programs

You may find it helpful to join a program that provides information to survivors and carers on how to adjust to life after cancer treatment. These are free and are run through Cancer Councils or hospitals. They discuss managing the side effects of treatment, diet, exercise, emotional health and self-care, returning to work, and information and support.

Some health services also offer cancer rehabilitation programs, which focus on exercise, managing fatigue and improving nutrition. There may be a cost for this type of program.

Speak with your doctor about services that may be suitable for you or call the Cancer Council Information and Support line (13 11 20) to find out what is available in your area.

### Mind and body therapies

Some psychological therapies may help. Ask your doctor for a referral to a health professional who has experience working with people with cancer-related fatigue.

Complementary therapies such as mindfulness, massage, healing touch, relaxation training and yoga may be helpful in reducing cancer-related fatigue.

### Medications, vitamins and other drugs

No medications will safely and effectively cure your cancer-related fatigue.

Using alcohol and drugs like marijuana can make cancer-related fatigue worse. If you are using alcohol and drugs like marijuana and are having difficulty stopping, please discuss this with your doctor.

There is evidence to support taking Ginseng to help reduce cancer-related fatigue. Other vitamin supplements and Chinese herbal medicine have **not** been shown to help treat cancer-related fatigue.

If you are taking something for cancer-related fatigue, see your doctor regularly and discuss whether the treatment seems to be helping.

Last reviewed: August 2016

### Further information

This overview was prepared with reference to:

-  American Society of Clinical Oncology, 2014, Screening, assessment, and management of fatigue in adult survivors of cancer: An American society of clinical oncology clinical practice guideline adaptation.
-  Australian Government Department of Health, 2014, Australia's physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines.
-  Barton, D.L., Liu, H., Dakhil, S.R., Linnquist, B., Sloan, J.A., Nichols, C.R., McGinn, T.W., Stella, P.J., Seeger, G.R., Sood, A. and Loprinzi, C.L., 2013. Wisconsin Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) to improve cancer-related fatigue: a randomized, double-blind trial, N07C2. Journal of the National Cancer Institute, p.djt181.
-  Berger A, et al., 2010, Cancer-related fatigue, Journal of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, 8(8): 904-931.
-  Berger, A.M., Mitchell, S.A., Jacobsen, P.B. and Pirl, W.F., 2015. Screening, evaluation, and management of cancer-related fatigue: Ready for implementation to practice?. CA: a cancer journal for clinicians, 65(3), pp.190-211.
-  Cramp F, Byron-Daniel J, 2012, Exercise for the management of cancer-related fatigue in adults, Cochrane Database of Systematic Review, Issue 11. Art. No.:CD006145.
-  Howell D, Keshavarz H, Broadfield L, et al., 2015, A pan Canadian practice guideline for screening, assessment, and management of cancer-related fatigue in adults, Version 2.
-  Lymphoma Association UK Fatigue, 2015, <http://www.lymphomas.org.uk/about-lymphoma/treatment/side-effects-lymphoma-treatments/fatigue>
-  Mitchell, S.A., Hoffman, A.J., Clark, J.C., DeGennaro, R.M., Poirier, P., Robinson, C.B. and Weisbrod, B.L., 2014. Putting Evidence Into Practice: An Update of Evidence-Based Interventions for Cancer-Related Fatigue During and Following Treatment. Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing, 18.
-  Oncology Nursing Society, 2015, Putting evidence into practice: Fatigue.

