

# Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue

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Tiredness or fatigue is the most common symptom reported by cancer patients and survivors. It can happen at any time during or after cancer treatment.

Cancer-related fatigue, is a feeling of lack of energy that is not linked with recent activity or effort. Cancer-related fatigue is unlike other types of fatigue, it can be very draining.

Cancer-related fatigue is more severe and lasts longer than other fatigue you may have had before you had cancer. It may not improve with rest and can affect your ability to function.

The amount of fatigue, how often it happens, and how long it lasts can be different for each person.

## Signs of Fatigue

- Exhaustion, it may be physical, emotional, spiritual and/or mental exhaustion
- Your body and limbs may feel heavy
- You have less desire to do normal activities like eating or shopping
- You may find it hard to concentrate or think clearly

## Causes of Fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue can be caused by:

- Your cancer
- Problems related to your cancer or treatment, like dehydration, fever, infection, nausea, pain, or anemia
- Drugs you are taking for your cancer or other health issues
- Lack of sleep
- Depression

**What are your questions? Please ask.  
We are here to help you.**

- Lack of physical activity
- Pain
- Emotional distress
- Nutrition problems
- Being an older adult

### **How Can My Cancer Care Team Help?**

Do not ignore fatigue. There are some helpful ways to manage cancer-related fatigue. Talk to your cancer care team if fatigue is a problem for you. Your cancer care team may ask you to rate your fatigue on a scale from 1-10. They may also ask you to keep a fatigue journal to track your fatigue patterns.

### **Your health care team can:**

- Treat the problems that cause fatigue
- Support you
- Help you find support in your community
- Refer you to specialists as needed

### **When Should I Call My Doctor or Nurse?**

- If your fatigue becomes worse
- If you think any of your current drugs might be causing your fatigue. Do not stop any drug before speaking with your doctor.
- If you have been too tired to get out of bed for the past 24 hours
- If you feel confused or cannot think clearly

### **Get medical help right away if you:**

- Feel dizzy, lose your balance or fall
- Feel like your cancer related fatigue is all of a sudden much worse
- Suddenly get short of breath or have a fast heart beat
- Have a fever higher than 38°C (100.4° F)
- Have any unexplained bleeding or bleeding that does not stop

## **What Can I Do?**

Fatigue can affect you in many ways, below are some common strategies for managing fatigue.

### **Physical Activity**

It is hard to be active when you feel tired. But, with cancer related fatigue, increasing your rest can actually make your fatigue worse.

Regular, mild to moderate activity can boost energy levels, elevate mood, and reduce fatigue.

Do regular, mild to moderate exercise—not infrequent, intense workouts.

Start slowly and increase over time as you are able to. For example, start walking for 5-10 minutes, 2-3 times a week and increase it slowly to 20-30 minutes, 3-4 times per week.

Stop activity and tell your nurse or doctor if you are feeling unwell or have a change in heart rate, breathing or pain.

Physical activity is one of the best things you can do to reduce your fatigue.

Activating Cancer Communities through an Exercise Strategy for Survivors (ACCESS) is a free 12-week program for cancer patients and families.

Currently, ACCESS is a two-year research project created to deliver an individually-tailored exercise plan for cancer patients and survivors.

It is available in Halifax and Truro. For more information about ACCESS, please email [access.wellness@nshealth.ca](mailto:access.wellness@nshealth.ca) or phone 902-473-2035.

### **Memory and Focus**

A decreased attention span and difficulty understanding and thinking can be part of cancer-related fatigue. Attention problems are quite common during and after cancer treatments.

- Plan activities that require a clear head or concentration when most you are most rested
- Learn new information in small amounts
- Make lists and/or keep a journal to keep track of appointments and to plan
- Take breaks to do things you enjoy, like a walk outside, gardening or listening to music
- Exercise your mind with crossword puzzles, Sudoku or word searches
- Bring someone with you to your appointments to take notes and ask questions

- Attend the “Coping with Cancer-related Brain Fog” two hour education session. For the date, time and location of upcoming sessions, please call 1-866-599-2267, (choose option 3).

## **Healthy Eating**

Try and see if 3 or 4 larger meals, or small snacks every 1-2 hours feels better for you. Eat whenever you start to feel hungry.

- You may find soft or liquid foods require less energy to eat, try soups, stews, scrambled eggs and smoothies
- Eat nutrient dense foods such as nuts and seeds, fresh or dried fruit, and yogurt
- Drink lots of fluids, dehydration can make fatigue seem worse
- Eat a variety of foods from the four food groups: meat and alternatives, fruit and vegetables, milk and milk products and grains
- Protein is important for healing, meat, fish, milk products and beans are good sources of protein
- Ask to see a dietitian if you are losing weight, have a low appetite or have a condition that restricts what you can eat

## **Sleep and Rest**

It is a common mistake to think that resting more will make your tiredness disappear. This is not true for cancer related fatigue.

- Night time should be reserved for the longest sleep of the day
- Try to do relaxing activities at bedtime
- Try not to lie in bed except when you are sleeping
- Nap for only 20 minutes at a time during the day
- Try to keep the bedroom free from activities such as reading or watching T.V.
- Avoid any ‘screen time’ (like computers, video games, electronic books) before bedtime. The light from the screens may affect your ability to fall asleep
- Do not eat before bed, try to eat light snacks in the evening
- Avoid smoking, alcohol and/or caffeinated drinks before bedtime
- Do not do strenuous activities before bedtime
- Relax before bedtime
- Drinking warm decaffeinated drinks, and/or relaxation techniques such as

meditation, warm baths, or music can help

- Go to bed at the same time each night
- If you haven't fallen asleep in 15 minutes or you wake and cannot get back to sleep, get up and go to another room to do relaxation exercises, then try again
- Keep your room cool, dark and quiet
- Wake at the same time every morning
- Within 30-60 minutes of waking, get some bright light (natural or artificial); this will help improve your energy and mood

## **Stress**

Cancer is stressful and your mood, beliefs, attitudes, and reactions to stress can also affect how tired you feel.

Feeling emotional is “normal” and it is OK to be upset or angry.

If your cancer treatment is finished, do not expect yourself to get “back to normal” right away. Give yourself some time to get back on your feet.

Talk to someone you trust about your feelings. Consider joining a support group, call the Canadian Cancer Society to find a Support Group in your community or online, 1-888-639-0222.

Learn about meditation, deep breathing, or relaxation techniques.

Keep a diary or journal about your feelings and experiences.

## **Social Support**

Social supports are important for someone with cancer related fatigue. Family members, friends and community groups can help you manage your fatigue.

- Accept offers of help and don't be afraid to ask for help
- Ask others to help with the things you need to do
- Ask someone to go with you to appointments and have them write down any information you might need later

## **How Can I Save My Energy?**

- Pace yourself and balance activity with rest
- Sit to do as many things as possible
- Put a chair in the bathroom so you can sit down when you wash and brush your teeth
- Avoid heavy lifting

- Organize your time to avoid rushing
- Identify when your energy is highest and lowest and organize your day around those times
- Limit leaning over to put on clothes and shoes
- Change your home to maximize efficient use of energy. For example, place chairs to allow rest stops along a long hallway
- Schedule household chores throughout the week
- Ask family and friends for help getting groceries and preparing meals
- Use easy-to-prepare foods, or consider using a grocery or meal delivery service
- Prepare meals sitting down
- Prepare double portions and freeze half

### **Child or Elder Care**

Sometimes people dealing with cancer-related fatigue feel like they are letting their family down. This can be very difficult for parents of young children and caregivers of elders.

Explain to family that you are feeling tired and are not able to do as much as you did before your cancer diagnosis. Their response and suggestions may also help you.

- Plan activities that can be done while sitting down.
- Avoid lifting smaller children (teach children to climb up on the lap or chair)
- Try to include children in age-appropriate chores
- Accept offers of help from people you trust
- Talk to your cancer care team if you need a break and don't have anyone to help with your children or elder.

### **Keeping a Fatigue Journal**

Keeping track of your cancer related fatigue in a journal can help you keep track of your fatigue so you can:

- Plan your activities
- Keep track of your progress
- Know when to get help

### **Every day, for at least a week, note:**

- Your symptoms of fatigue
- How tired you feel (0 = not tired to 10=exhausted)
- When you feel most tired
- When you have the most energy
- What makes the fatigue better or worse
- How fatigue affects your daily living
- How worried you are about your fatigue (0=not worried to 10=very worried)
- Your daily activities, treatments, drugs and amount of sleep

### **When Should I See a Specialist**

If you have:

- Severe fatigue
- Heart or lung problems
- Had recent major surgery
- Lack of physical activity
- Limited range of motion

### **Your doctor may refer you to a:**

- Physiotherapist
- Occupational Therapist
- Physical Medicine Specialist
- Exercise Specialist
- Rehabilitation Specialist

### **Helpful Hints for Caregivers**

It is important to take care of your health and well being so that you can give the best possible care to your family member. Take quality time for yourself – schedule a day off or some quiet time at home.

Watch for signs of stress, such as impatience, loss of appetite, or difficulty sleeping.

Don't be afraid to ask for or accept help from friends or family – suggest specific

chores or projects that they can do to help you.

Make sure you understand your loved one's illness and treatment. This can reduce uncertainty and worry.

Contact Caregivers Nova Scotia for information and support, visit <https://caregiversns.org> or phone 1-877-488-7390.

### **Where Can I Learn More?**

- Cancer Information Service, 1-888-939-6666
- Cancer-related Fatigue (American Cancer Society)
- Eating Well When You Have Cancer, [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)
- Eat Well, Be Active: What You Can Do, [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)
- Fatigue, [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)
- Fatigue (**Cancer.Net**)
- Fatigue and Cancer Treatment (US National Cancer Institute)
- Life After Cancer, [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)
- Manage Cancer Fatigue (Sunnybrook Hospital)
- Sexuality and Cancer, [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)



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For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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