

Cancer-Related Fatigue

What is cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is a persistent feeling of physical, emotional, or mental tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer and/or its treatment. Unlike other types of fatigue, the feeling does not go away with rest. Most people receiving cancer treatment experience fatigue, and some people will continue to experience fatigue after treatment is over. If you experience fatigue, it is important to tell your doctor. Fatigue can cause a person with cancer to avoid or skip treatments. It may also negatively affect other areas of life, including mental and physical health, relationships, and work.



What causes cancer-related fatigue?

Most people receiving chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, or other treatments experience fatigue. This fatigue may be caused by a low level of red blood cells, called anemia, or hormone levels that are too low or too high. Side effects related to nutrition, such as loss of appetite or dehydration, may result in fatigue, as can a lack of exercise. Anxiety and depression are the most common psychological reasons fatigue occurs. Pain, stress, lack of sleep, medications, and other medical conditions can also cause fatigue.

How is fatigue diagnosed?

Your doctor will look at several factors to diagnose fatigue because it may have more than one cause. Diagnosing fatigue often starts with a discussion of how your fatigue is affecting you. Your doctor may ask when your fatigue began, when you feel most tired, how long it lasts, if it has changed over time, and what makes it better or worse. You might also be asked to rate your fatigue on a scale from "no fatigue" to "most fatigue." Your doctor will likely do a physical examination and may recommend blood tests to check for anemia, any cancer-related changes, or other health conditions that cause fatigue.

How is cancer-related fatigue treated?

The first step in managing fatigue is to treat any medical condition causing or worsening your fatigue, such as pain, depression or anxiety, lack of sleep, poor nutrition, anemia, cancer treatment, or other medical conditions. If the cause is not known, you may need to try several methods to reduce or manage fatigue. Staying physically active or increasing your activity level can help relieve fatigue. Once you are healthy enough for physical activity, try to aim for or build up to 150 minutes of moderate activity per week, such as fast walking, cycling, or swimming, plus 2 to 3 strength training sessions per week. Talking with a therapist or counselor may help you reframe your thoughts about fatigue and improve coping skills and/or sleep problems. In addition, some patients find that acupuncture and mindfulness-based approaches such as yoga may help as well. Fatigue is often a problem for some patients months or years after treatment ends, so it is important to see your doctor for long-term follow-up care.

Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- How do I know if I have cancer-related fatigue?
- What can be done to prevent fatigue?
- What could be causing my fatigue?
- How will you find out what is causing my fatigue?
- Are there medications that can help treat my fatigue?
- Are there nonmedical options that can help treat or manage my fatigue?
- What strategies can I use to reduce or manage my fatigue?
- Are there any clinical trials related to fatigue that I can participate in?
- What is the difference between fatigue and depression?
- If I experience depression or anxiety, is there someone who can help me?
- Who can help me set up a safe exercise program?
- Who can help me understand my nutritional needs?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Find more questions to ask the health care team at www.cancer.net/sideeffects. For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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WORDS TO KNOW

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Clinical trial:

A research study that tests a new treatment or drug

Coexisting conditions:

Health problems that a person has in addition to cancer

Counseling:

Talking with a trained mental health professional

Dehydration:

The loss of too much water from the body

Depression:

Having a low mood and/or feeling numb consistently for more than 2 weeks

Hormones:

Chemicals found in the body that affect processes

Oncology social worker:

A professional who provides counseling, education, and information services to people with cancer

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays or other particles to destroy cancer cells

Registered dietitian:

A food and nutrition professional

Supportive care:

The relief of side effects, also called palliative care

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