

People with fatigue feel tired all the time, having little energy or motivation. Fatigue can make you feel exhausted and unable to complete even simple tasks. For most people, occasional or mild fatigue is a normal response to activity. For people with cancer, fatigue can be moderate, severe or long lasting (chronic). It often takes many small changes to get your energy back. These small changes add up and can improve your energy.



Cancer-Related Fatigue

PHYSICAL INTERVENTIONS

Activity



Exercise is scientifically shown to improve fatigue. Take walks outside if you are able. Not only is this good exercise, but it also gives the body fresh air and natural sunlight. While walking, you can also deep breathe, relax, and clear the mind. Talk about your exercise plans with a physical therapist or your doctor, especially if your cancer involves the bone or causes low pH. Avoid public places like swimming pools or public gyms if you have been told you have neutropenia (low white blood cell count).

Use relaxation techniques, such as yoga, tai chi, meditation, or massage therapy. Massage should be done by a qualified therapist who avoids deep body massage in areas where there is cancer and areas that have been treated with radiation.

Eating and Drinking



Eat a well-balanced diet of lean proteins, whole grains, lots of fruits and vegetables, and low-fat dairy products. Avoid taking too much caffeine, especially after noon. Avoid alcohol. Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow.

Sleep



Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Keeping the same bedtime routine will give your brain clues it is time to sleep. Consider stress reducing activities prior to bed such as reading, journaling, yoga, meditation, or calming music. Your bedroom should be dark, cool, quiet, comfortable and only used for sleep or sex. Taking a warm bath or shower before bed and avoiding the television or screens 2 hours before bedtime can help improve your sleep quality. Napping during the day is fine, but try to keep naps to less than 1 hour. Make sure you have been screened for sleep apnea. Avoid heavy meals in the evening.

Treat Underlying Causes

It is important to talk about fatigue with your doctor as it may mean you need additional tests. Talk to your oncologist about causes of fatigue that may be associated with your cancer treatment. Conditions like severe anemia, dehydration, and low thyroid can contribute to fatigue and are treatable. Talk with a doctor about limiting or stopping sedating medications. The burden of symptoms such as pain, shortness of breath, nausea, loss of appetite, anxiety and depression can contribute to fatigue. Aggressively managing symptoms will relieve the body of this burden and help you gain back some energy.

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Medications/Supplements

There are some supplements on the market advertised as energy boosters. Some of these are safe and others can be dangerous depending on your health problems and current treatments. Talk to your oncologist or request a naturopath referral if you are interested in using supplements meant to boost energy.

In some cases your medical team may use prescription medications intended to help with energy. It is generally safest to try all of the other interventions discussed in this handout before looking into these types of medications. All medications can cause some side effects. Palliative care providers can help you with a holistic fatigue treatment plan.



SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS

Maintain supportive relationships and stay connected to your loved ones. Studies show that one predictor of good outcomes is the number of relationships you have. Friends and family often want to help but don't know what to do – give them a task that would otherwise cost you a lot of energy.

INTELLECTUAL INTERVENTIONS

Understand that cancer-related fatigue is real.

“In looking at fatigue and its relation to energy expenditure, a good visual is that of an iceberg. Just as the bulk of the iceberg is below the surface of the water, the majority of our energy expenditure happens ‘below the surface,’ literally at the cellular level, as the body is working to function throughout the day, stay alive, battle cancer, battle the effects of treatment, deal with the side effects of medication, etc. All that energy expenditure can leave one exhausted, and so it is important to be gentle with yourself.” – John Erickson, FNP-C, Palliative Medicine Nurse Practitioner



Energy Conservation

- **Prioritize:** It can be helpful to think of your energy as a budget and work to save your energy for the things that really matter to you. Consider delegating some tasks to friends/family members who are offering to help. Save your energy for activities that bring you the most joy.
- **Plan:** Organize your home and/or work environment so it takes as little energy as possible to complete tasks.
- **Pace:** Space more taxing activities throughout the week. Do more difficult tasks when you have more energy.
- **Posture:** Maintain good posture. Use long-handled devices such as grabbers to avoid stooping/bending/climbing.

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EMOTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Understand that you may be grieving the loss of certain aspects of life. Studies show that counseling can help reduce fatigue associated with anxiety, grief, and stress. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most studied type of counseling used for fatigue. Some studies actually show that the effects of CBT can last up to 2 years.

Think about things you have done in the past to manage stress. Would that same thing be helpful again? Also, make time to do something that brings you joy. Consider joining an online or in-person support group. Learn some deep breathing techniques. Journal about hopes, worries, and things you are grateful for

SPIRITUAL INTERVENTIONS

Nurture your spiritual connections in a way that is meaningful to you. Practice activities that bring you hope, meaning, comfort, strength, peace, love and connection. Spend time in nature. Sit outside for a while. Go to a place of worship. Pray or meditate. Read inspirational works. Remember the body is designed to heal and it heals better when you are relaxed.