

Fatigue Management

Fatigue among cancer patients is not well understood, but it is a common complaint occurring in over 90% of patients. A variety of factors may contribute to the development of cancer-related fatigue. These include tumor and treatment-related factors, low blood counts, depression, disturbance in sleep/wake cycles, pain, nutritional deficits and chronic inactivity.

It is difficult to describe fatigue, as the symptoms are often vague and intermittent. You may feel tired, worn out, exhausted, or disinterested in things around you. You may find it difficult to carry on your activities of daily living such as caring for your family, tending to your personal duties, or even complying with your treatment program. Fatigue may manifest itself physically, mentally and/or emotionally. This feeling is usually intermittent – you may find times during the day when you are more fatigued.

Nutrition

Many cancers make chemicals that stimulate the body to burn calories at a much faster rate. We call this a hyper-metabolic state. Because of this, a cancer patient may require 1 ½ to 2 times the caloric intake just to maintain a steady body weight. Tumor growth also places a higher energy demand on the body.

These increased energy demands come at a time when many patients do not feel like or are unable to increase their food intake. Depression and anxiety over the cancer diagnosis and treatment can certainly suppress the appetite. Side effects of your treatment may include nausea, vomiting or diarrhea – also affecting food intake.

Cancer Treatment

If you are undergoing radiation therapy, you may have increased energy requirements because our body is trying to repair normal tissue from the damaging effects of treatment and because of the accumulation of cell destruction products.

Chemotherapy may induce fatigue in several ways. Chemotherapy damages normal cells as well as cancer cells. The body uses excess energy to repair these normal tissues. Also, chemotherapy can suppress the bone marrow leading to anemia and lowered immunity.

Stress

Many patients are experiencing prolonged stress. The reasons are obvious. Most people have had to rearrange their lives and often their family's lives to pursue their treatment course – which often is quite lengthy. Job-related stress results from decreased productivity, increased time off from work and financial strain from loss of work. There is also the psychological stress of dealing with a cancer diagnosis.

Medication

Many medications commonly prescribed to cancer patients can cause one to feel lethargic and weak. Anti-nausea medication, antidepressants, narcotic pain medication, anti-seizure agents can all affect energy levels.

HOW TO COPE

Nutrition

A diet high in protein may help boost energy levels. Obviously, adequate calorie intake is of paramount importance. Liquid meal supplements like Boost or Ensure can provide proper nutrition and calories in a relatively small volume. Also, eating multiple small meals throughout the day can help meet energy demands when your appetite is suppressed.

Exercise

Exercise ability will vary among patients and is a function of baseline (before cancer) physical condition, age, and functional ability. Suggestions to increase activity include walking, swimming, stationary bike or treadmill, resistance training, weight lifting (even if it is just a can of soup) and even stretching can help energy levels and prevent muscle atrophy. Ask your doctors what you can do to increase your activity level. Everyone has limitations – just do what you can.

Emotional Support

Think of activities that give you pleasure and do more of them. Examples include visiting with friends, gardening, walking on the beach, reading, enjoying a favorite hobby or working – Going about your normal daily activities and staying involved takes your mind off your illness and therapy, and provides emotional satisfaction, which can help relieve fatigue.

Stress

Try to eliminate as much stress from your life as possible. Learn to prioritize and focus your energy on healing. Delegate household responsibilities to other family members. Let co-workers help you at work. Let friends actually help when they offer. Most people around you would like to help – most just don't know what you need.

Rest

It is very important to get enough sleep. You may require more sleep during your treatment because of increased energy demands. Try taking a mid-day nap for a quick boost in energy – or simply retire earlier in the evening or sleep later in the morning – whatever works best for your schedule.

Medication

Most of your medications are necessary to manage effects of therapy or the tumor. If you can identify a medication that causes you to feel fatigued – ask your doctor if there is a suitable substitute that may cause less fatigue. Use only the amounts of narcotic pain medication you need to control your pain – ask your doctor about non-narcotic substitution if your pain is only mild or moderate.

Vitamins

Oncologists may have different opinions regarding vitamins during chemotherapy or radiation therapy. In some instances vitamins may potentially decrease the effectiveness of treatment. Discuss this with your oncologist before taking vitamin supplements.