

Fatigue and Cancer



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

**MD Anderson
Cancer Center**

Making Cancer History®



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Cancer-related fatigue has many causes. It is the most common cancer symptom and treatment side effect.

About Fatigue and Cancer

Fatigue means feeling tired physically or mentally. Fatigue that is caused by cancer is more severe. It lasts longer and can get in the way of your daily activities. Walking, bathing, eating, shopping or even talking on the phone may be hard to do when you feel fatigued. It may affect every part of your life.

With everyday fatigue, you might rest and then feel refreshed to start or carry on with your day. With cancer-related fatigue, rest or sleep may not help you feel better.

Many patients describe feeling:

- Tired or worn out
- Weak or weary
- Exhausted
- Heavy or slow

Cancer-related fatigue can also cause many other symptoms, such as:

- Having a hard time thinking and doing daily tasks
- Having a hard time sleeping
- Feeling short of breath
- Feeling leg pain
- Feeling more irritable, nervous, anxious or impatient
- Having a hard time walking even short distances

Causes

There are many causes of cancer-related fatigue. It is the most common cancer symptom and treatment side effect. In fact, many patients first see a doctor because of this symptom. One or more of the following can cause fatigue.

Cancer

Cancers of the blood, such as leukemia and lymphoma, can cause fatigue. Solid tumors that have spread to the bone marrow can cause fatigue, too.

Cancer Treatment

Chemotherapy – Any chemotherapy medicine may cause fatigue. It may start after several weeks of treatment, and it can last from a few days to until after treatment ends.

Radiation Treatment – During radiation, the body uses more energy to repair tissue. Fatigue may get worse over time and can last a few weeks after treatment or up to 2 or 3 months.

Surgery – Most patients have some fatigue after surgery, but it often gets better with time.

Stem Cell or Bone Marrow Transplant – In the first months after transplant, patients may feel tired most of the time. Over time, energy may increase, but patients may never have as much energy as they once did. However, they can still manage their fatigue to feel better.



Immunotherapy – This treatment works with the immune system, which is the body’s way of fighting infection. The treatment may lead to constant fatigue or have side effects that feel like the flu. This includes fever, chills, muscle pain, headache and an overall sense of not feeling well.

Combination treatment – Some patients get more than one kind of treatment. They may have 2 or more treatments at once. Patients who receive combination treatment may have more fatigue.

New medicine or treatment – If a patient participates in a clinical trial, they may receive a new cancer treatment. When new treatments are being studied, it may be uncertain which side effects, like fatigue, patients will have and for how long.

Other Causes of Fatigue

Some other causes of fatigue are listed below.

Anemia – Anemia occurs when your red blood cell level becomes low. This affects your body’s ability to move oxygen to the cells. Having less oxygen in the cells makes the body weak. Cancer and its treatment can cause anemia.

Nutrition – Your diet can impact fatigue. You become fatigued because your body needs more “fuel” to make energy. Even if you eat the right

foods, you may become fatigued if your body cannot process food the best way.

Sleep disorders and inactivity – Fatigue may get worse if you do not sleep well. Less sleep at night or too much sleep during the day can create poor sleep habits. Patients who are less active during the day or who wake up often during the night have worse fatigue.

Psychological (mood and depression) – Anxiety, stress and mood can all cause fatigue. Also, if you become depressed, the fatigue can worsen. It may last longer than usual, even after the physical causes are gone. Fatigue can also lead to feelings of low self-esteem and frustration. This may make you feel helpless.

Mental fatigue – Mental fatigue may make it hard for you to focus, think clearly and make decisions. Constant mental effort and high levels of stress or emotion may also contribute.

Pain – Chronic or severe pain can increase fatigue. If you are in pain, you may not be resting or sleeping well at night.

Medicines – Many medicines can cause fatigue. Some pain medicines cause drowsiness, for example. Other medicines that treat depression, nausea, anxiety and seizures can cause drowsiness or fatigue.

Talk to your doctor about your fatigue.



Warning Signs

It is important that you pay attention to your own personal warning signs of fatigue. These signs might be:

- A weak feeling over the entire body
- Tired eyes, legs and stiff shoulders
- Having a hard time focusing
- Waking up tired after rest or sleep
- Lack of energy or less energy
- Lack of motivation to be physically active
- Feeling more irritable, nervous, anxious or impatient

Diagnosis

Since fatigue is a common side effect of cancer and its treatments, talk with your doctor or nurse. Your health care team may offer solutions that could help with your fatigue. Your doctor may also recommend the following:

Anemia evaluation. There are different kinds of anemia. Your doctor may use your health history, a physical exam and blood tests to figure out the kind you may have.

Referral to MD Anderson's Fatigue Clinic. Your doctor may refer you to MD Anderson's Fatigue Clinic to evaluate and treat your fatigue. You also may ask your doctor for a referral to the clinic.

MD Anderson's Fatigue Clinic

MD Anderson's Fatigue Clinic assesses, manages and treats cancer-related fatigue. You must have a referral from your MD Anderson doctor in order for the Fatigue Clinic to schedule an appointment for you.

Fatigue Assessment Form

You will be asked to complete the fatigue assessment form at your first visit in the Fatigue Clinic. The form takes about 20 minutes to complete.

Certain parts of your health history relating to fatigue are important. You may also be asked about your other health problems to figure out the cause and best treatment for your fatigue.

The Fatigue Clinic Team

When you arrive at the Fatigue Clinic, the nurse will make sure you have completed the fatigue assessment form. The nurse will bring you to the exam room, review the fatigue assessment form with you and explain how patients are evaluated. You will also get information about fatigue.

If you have not had current lab tests, they will be ordered. These tests will check for anemia, hormone levels and nutritional problems.

The doctor will ask you about your health history and do a complete physical exam. Your walking patterns, posture and joints will also be checked.

Based on the lab tests, physical exam and the fatigue assessment form, the doctor will diagnose the cause of your fatigue. They will also talk to you about treatment options.



Treatment for Fatigue

For some patients, treating fatigue may be as important as treating the cancer. Here are some suggestions for treating fatigue.

Exercise

When people are diagnosed with cancer, their whole world comes to a stop. Everything becomes about treatment and feeling better. The daily routine that you once knew may no longer exist. Instead, you may be going to the doctor, getting treatment or even staying in the hospital.

When you are less active or change your routine, you may feel more tired and have a lack of energy. As you spend more time in bed or sitting in chairs, you may also feel anxious, depressed, weak, fatigued and nauseous.

It may be surprising to you, but exercise helps many patients with fatigue. A patient's first response to this suggestion may be, "I'm tired, and you want me to exercise?"

Yes, many studies have shown that people who have cancer and who exercise have:

- More energy
- Better appetite
- Improved ability to do everyday physical activities
- Better quality of life
- Improved outlook and sense of well-being

Even during cancer treatment, you may want to exercise. During this time, you may benefit from a rehabilitation program. The Fatigue Clinic works closely with Rehabilitation Services, Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy and often refers patients for help with developing an exercise program.

Talk with your doctor before starting an exercise program. Your doctor may suggest other options if you are unable to exercise.

It is important to pay attention to your own personal warning signs of fatigue. There are several treatment options that can help with fatigue.



It may be surprising to you, but exercise helps many patients with fatigue.

General Exercise Guidelines

- Start slowly and allow your body time to adjust.
- Follow a regular exercise schedule. A schedule can help you exercise safely and avoid injury.
- If you have extreme soreness, stiffness, exhaustion or feel short of breath, you are overdoing it. It is important to exercise at your own pace.
- Exercise with caution. Have a family member or friend exercise with you.
- Don't exercise in the heat or humidity.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

Here are some suggestions for safe and helpful exercise:

Brisk walking – Walking is an easy and cheap way to exercise. It can also be a great social activity. Start with a slow to moderate pace. Gradually walk for a longer time each week until you can go for 30 to 45 minutes. There are many places to walk safely. For example, you can walk in your home or head to the nearest shopping mall to walk indoors in a well-lit space. Here are some tips:

- Wear walking shoes.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Scan the path for uneven surfaces.
- Use a walking cane to help with your balance.

If you are not used to walking, you may feel soreness the next day. A warm bath may help.

Stretching and light weight training – This is a good way to exercise if you cannot leave the house. A physical therapist, occupational therapist or certified trainer can help you design your own workout plan. Examples of exercises are:

- Upper arm curls
- Walking lunges
- Heel rises
- Walking up and down stairs
- Bicycle motion while lying down

For weight training, use canned food, water bottles or rubber bands. YouTube or some streaming services offer fitness shows that explain how to do these exercises. For example, you may view a “Sit and Be Fit” program online.

Water aerobics (if allowed by your doctor) – Water aerobics is a great form of exercise because it causes less stress on your muscles and joints. You do not need to know how to swim. It is often done in waist- or chest-high water. The best place for water aerobics is an indoor pool where the water is not too hot or cold. For classes, check with local gyms, the YMCA or community centers.

Remember to check with your doctor first if you are currently having cancer treatment. You may need to wait until you have finished treatment before starting a water program.



Yoga – Yoga is a good way to become more flexible and relax because it focuses on breathing. It is normally done in a class, but you can often view beginner classes on a streaming service, YouTube or online.

Indoor stationary cycling – With indoor cycling, there are no complex moves or techniques to learn. You are always in control of the bike’s speed and tension. It is low impact and causes less stress on knees, hips and ankles than many other forms of exercise. To get started, check with a local gym for classes.

Movement classes, such as yoga, are available at MD Anderson. Check MDAnderson.org/IntegrativeMedCenter or contact Integrative Medicine for more information.

What are some exercises you can try?



Eat Sensibly

Fatigue can become worse if you are not eating enough or if you are not eating the right foods. Eating a balanced diet can help you feel better and have more energy. Here are some tips to help you manage and maintain good nutrition.

1. **Eat the right amount of calories.** If you are unable to eat regular sized meals, eat small meals more often.
2. **Include protein in your diet.** Fish, lean meats, low-fat yogurt and cheeses, eggs, legumes, beans and peanut butter are good sources of protein.
3. **Drink plenty of fluids.** Drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses of fluid (64 ounces total) each day to stay hydrated. Fluids are water, juice, milk, broth, milk shakes, gelatin and other drinks. If you are not able to eat much, choose liquids that are high in calories or protein. Drink milk, juices, smoothies and nutritional supplements.
4. **Eat foods rich in vitamins and minerals.** Fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and whole grains are good sources of vitamins and minerals.
5. **Meet with a dietitian.** A registered dietitian can help you with eating concerns so that you get the nutrients you need. Suggestions may be given to increase calories and eat protein in your diet. Ask to meet with a dietitian.

Try one of these easy and well-balanced snack ideas:

- Apple and string cheese
- Banana and peanut butter
- Cottage cheese and berries
- Meat, cheese or peanut butter on bread
- Fresh or dried fruit and nuts
- Graham crackers and skim milk
- Whole grain crackers with cheese
- Orange juice and milk smoothie
- Tortilla and beans
- Yogurt with granola and nuts

Sleep Well

Not getting enough good sleep may be a reason for fatigue. If you are less active during the day and wake up often at night, you are more likely to have higher levels of fatigue. A change in your sleeping pattern can also add to your fatigue.

If this is the case, your doctor may refer you to the MD Anderson Sleep Center. If a sleep problem or disorder is causing your fatigue, there are treatments that can help.

To help you sleep during the night, you may want to try these ideas.



During the Day

- Exercise regularly. Even a short walk during the day can help you relax. Don't exercise in the evening. Give yourself at least 2 to 4 hours before bedtime to recover from exercise.
- Limit naps. If you need a nap, keep it to 30 minutes or shorter.

Before Bedtime

- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, chocolate and nicotine in the late afternoon and evening. Limit liquids in the evening before going to bed.
- Turn off electronic devices including your computer, phone and tablet 1 hour before bedtime. Listen to quiet music or take a warm bath instead.
- If you worry or are not able to “turn off your brain” when you try to sleep, make a list of the things you need to do the next day. This may help you to relax.

At Bedtime

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- A bedtime snack of warm milk, turkey or a banana may make you sleepy.
- Use your bedroom for sleep and intimacy only. Don't read, watch TV or work in the bedroom.
- If you are a “clock watcher,” turn the clock away from you.
- To fall asleep, lie in the position that you normally find yourself in when you wake up.
- Have your partner go to bed at the same time as you.

Other ways you can save energy

Saving energy during the day may help you have less fatigue.



Other Helpful Tips for Bedtime

- Sleep in a dark, cool, quiet, relaxing room.
- Add 1 extra hour of sleep if you feel ill or feel unable to get up at the scheduled time in the morning.
- Use meditation, massage or relaxation to lower stress.
- Avoid things that are mentally exciting like the TV, computer and video games.
- If you wake during the night and can't fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, go to another room to relax. Read a book (not on an electronic device) or listen to music. When you are sleepy, return to bed.

Manage Stress

Learning about stress management and relaxation can help manage your fatigue. Here are some tips.

- Learn about relaxation techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing.
- Take part in hobbies that require little physical energy. Try knitting, reading or listening to music.
- Talk to your family and friends, and ask for help.
- Cancer support groups can be a great resource for support and understanding. Ask your social work counselor for a list of support groups in your area.
- If your stress seems out of control or you feel depressed, ask to speak with a counselor or therapist.

Consider Medicine

Sometimes, medicines can help with fatigue. They can help improve energy and memory, give a sense of well-being and increase appetite. However, some medicines can also cause sleeplessness, excitement or a “jittery” feeling and mood changes. Patients taking these kinds of medicines are watched closely for possible reactions and harmful effects. Doses may be changed, if needed.



Save Energy

Saving energy during the day may help you have less fatigue. How you stand, walk, move your body and use your work area can affect your energy. Use the tips below to save energy and lower your level of fatigue.

Plan and Organize Your Work

- Do tasks that require more energy during the time of day when you have the most energy.
- Alternate tasks that use lots of energy with those that take less.
- Every day, plan the activities that you would like to do.
- Ask others to do as much as possible for you.
- Do not do tasks that are not important. Skip steps if possible.
- Combine errands into one trip and simplify details.

Pace Yourself

- Go at a medium pace. Don't rush.
- Avoid bursts of activity. This can drain energy.
- Create a routine to prevent overdoing it.
- Schedule rest.
- Balance activities so you are doing, resting, doing, resting and so on.
- Stop to rest before you get tired.

Move Your Body Safely

- Sit down to do activities when possible.
- Use helpful devices. For example, use walkers, scooters, canes, handrails and grab bars.
- Avoid heavy lifting, such as children, pots, pans and laundry. Bend at the knees and use your leg muscles to lift, not your back. Use carts or wagons to move things from room to room or place to place.
- Limit work that requires you to reach over your head. Store items at waist level.

Prioritize Your Activities

- Make a list to decide which activities are important for you to do. Decide which tasks can be assigned to someone else.
- Focus on things you enjoy doing.

Control Your Living Space

- Avoid temperatures that are very hot or very cold.
- Don't take long, hot showers or baths. This can drain your energy.

Ask to schedule an appointment with a dietitian about the best sources and amounts of food you need.



Tips to Save Energy

Dressing

- Wear loose-fitting clothes.
- Wear clothes that don't have many buttons.
- Use a reacher or dressing stick to help with zippers in back.
- Sit down while you are dressing.
- For women, fasten your bra in front and turn it to the back.
- Wear slip-on shoes or shoes that have Velcro® ties.
- Use a long-handled shoehorn or sock aid.
- Bring your foot to your knee. Don't lean over to put on your socks and shoes.

Bathing and Grooming

- Use a chair in the shower or tub.
- Use a long-handled sponge or brush to reach your back and feet.
- Use liquid soap or soap-on-a-rope.
- Use a terry cloth robe instead of towels to dry off.
- Use organizers to keep items within reach.
- Rest your elbows on a counter to avoid leaning.
- Use a raised toilet seat.
- Wash your hair in the shower rather than over a sink.
- Use long-handled brushes or combs to avoid holding your arms over your head.

- Sit down while blow drying your hair, shaving or applying makeup.

Housework

- Spread out tasks over the week or month.
- Ask friends or family for help, or hire someone to help you.
- Use long-handled dusters, mops and dustpans.
- Pull the vacuum cleaner behind you instead of pushing it in front of you.

Shopping

- Make a list.
- Organize your list by store aisle.
- Ask for help in the store, or use a motorized cart while shopping.
- Shop online and have your groceries delivered.
- Shop when stores are less crowded.

Cooking

- Take out all the ingredients before you start.
- Use mixes or pre-packaged foods.
- Put items used the most at chest level to limit bending or reaching.
- Cook in dishes that are also serving pieces.
- Use small, lightweight appliances.
- Use a blender or mixer instead of mixing by hand.
- Buy utensils that fit comfortably in your hand.
- Line ovens and drip pans with foil for easier cleanup.



It is important for caregivers to stay healthy and take care of their own well-being.

- Let dishes soak rather than scrubbing them.
- Let dishes air-dry.

Child Care

- Plan activities or outings at a place that will allow sitting.
- Take advantage of day care programs.
- Teach children to make a game of household chores.

Workplace

- Plan work around your best times of the day.
- Create work centers so the equipment is within easy reach.
- Make shortcuts.
- Take rest breaks.
- Work half days, if possible.
- Ask your employer if you can work from home.

Leisure

- Plan activities that allow you to sit or lie down.
- Plan social activities for when you have the most energy.

Other

- Install and use ramps.
- Use a lift chair.
- Use cruise control when driving.

Other Ideas to Save Energy

The Learning Center's staff provide the latest information about wellness, cancer and coping.



Information for Caregivers

It is important for caregivers to stay healthy and take care of their own well-being. This is how they can give the best possible care to their loved ones. Caregivers can suffer from fatigue because of the physical and emotional demands placed on them. Much of the information provided in this booklet can also be used by caregivers.

Helpful Tips for Caregivers

- Take time for yourself and your needs. Ask family members and friends for help in caring for your loved one and who are able to help with errands or tasks. People concerned about your loved one's well-being will appreciate being able to help.
- Eat well-balanced meals and drink plenty of fluids every day.
- Take short walks and exercise daily.
- Get enough sleep, and rest between activities.
- Make time to relax and participate in hobbies that you enjoy. This can help reduce stress.
- Be realistic. Don't try to do too much or overload your daily "to do" list.
- Set limits with your loved one. Decide what you can do alone.
- Join a support group or share your feelings with family and friends.

Resources at MD Anderson

Use this list of available resources at MD Anderson for patients and caregivers.

Fatigue Clinic

Ask your doctor for a referral to the Fatigue Clinic.

Sleep Center

Ask your doctor for a referral to the Sleep Center.

The Learning Center

The Learning Center is a patient education library. The staff provide current and reliable information on cancer prevention, treatment, coping and general health. The library is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

- Theodore N. Law Learning Center
Main Building
Floor 4, Elevator A
713-745-8063
- Levit Family Learning Center
Mays Clinic
Floor 2, near Elevator T
713-563-8010



My Action Plan

Making a plan to help manage your fatigue is key. List ideas and tips you can try. Write down name of people who can help with tasks or errands.
