



Coping with fatigue

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is the feeling of extreme tiredness or exhaustion all or most of the time. It can feel overwhelming and is often not improved by rest.

People often describe feeling 'drained of energy', 'physically exhausted' or 'washed out'. Fatigue can be mild in some people and does not affect their daily routine. For others, fatigue can be more severe and can cause disruption to their normal daily life.

Common symptoms of fatigue

- General tiredness and a feeling of having no energy
- Being unable to summon the energy to do even small daily chores
- Lacking in motivation or feeling 'like you can't be bothered'
- Avoiding socialising because it is too much effort
- Experiencing difficulty in getting to sleep
- Feeling sad or upset
- Feeling impatient with others, affecting your relationships with family and friends
- Having trouble remembering things
- Finding decision-making more difficult or slow
- A loss in sex drive

Causes of fatigue

- Fatigue is a common symptom associated with having cancer
- Treatments such as radiotherapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy and surgery all increase the amount of fatigue you feel
- Pain can make fatigue seem worse and, likewise, fatigue can make pain feel worse. It is important to tell us about the level of pain you are experiencing so that the right treatment can be given to help you
- Cancer and cancer treatments can lower your appetite. Help and advice can be provided and we can also make referrals to a dietitian
- Some medications can also cause fatigue or drowsiness
- Anxiety, stress, tension and depression can all effect levels of fatigue
- Fatigue can also increase if a person is anaemic: red blood cells contain haemoglobin which transports oxygen to all of the cells in the body to provide energy. If the haemoglobin level is low, this can result in the body having low energy levels

How long can fatigue last?

The length of time that fatigue lasts depends on the cause and people are all affected differently. Some people find that fatigue affects them in peaks and troughs. The fatigue can continue even after the cause has stopped. This is especially true of cancer treatments so it is important that you let us know if you are concerned about fatigue.

Ways to help with fatigue

Talk to someone

Fatigue is a symptom which your health professionals need to know about in order to help. If you are feeling fatigued, talk to your family and friends about how the fatigue is affecting your daily life. They may be able to help you with simple tasks, like chores or shopping.

Make a plan

- Plan periods of activity and rest. Try doing things 'little and often' with rests in between
- If you are feeling well one day try not to overdo things as you may feel more tired the following day. It is about trying to find a balance between doing things to keep active and taking enough rest
- Decide what is most important to you and prioritise that
- If you need help with chores, ask someone to help
- Try not to use all your energy to do chores. Try to find some time each day to spend energy doing something you enjoy
- It can be helpful to plan friends and family visits as, although welcome, they can be tiring especially if they are unplanned and you are trying to have a restful day. 'You' time is essential

Conserving energy

- It is difficult sometimes to accept that you may not have the energy to do everything you are used to doing.
- It is a good idea to try and find a balance between simple tasks or gentle exercise and overdoing things
- To conserve energy, try doing tasks using the least amount of energy, or combine activities and take frequent rest breaks
- Look at doing simple things first. Several simple things done easily increase your motivation
- If possible sit down to do tasks rather than stand and take time afterwards to relax
- If friends or family are able to help with tasks, consider letting them help

Rest and sleep

Aim to keep to a normal sleep pattern

- Additionally a nap in the day can be beneficial but, if it interferes with how well you sleep at night, keep them reasonably short
- A 30–40 minute 'power nap' can be helpful as you don't tend to sleep too deeply during this time and is much less likely to affect your sleep at night
- Setting an alarm can prevent you from sleeping too long in the daytime and interfering with your night time sleep

Take time to relax before going to bed

- Have a regular routine to help you relax before turning in for bed
- Avoid watching television or using electronic devices to read in bed as the light from these may stimulate rather than relax you
- Make sure the bedroom is not too hot, too cold or too noisy

Avoid creating problems getting to sleep

- Try not to fall asleep in the chair or on the sofa as when you wake up to go to bed it is often harder to go back to sleep
- If something is playing on your mind at bedtime there is little you can do about it there and then, so try writing it down before going to bed and then deal with it in the morning when you feel rested
- If you can't sleep, get up after about 15–20 minutes and do something that helps you relax, such as reading or listening to quiet music. After a while you should start to feel tired enough to go back to bed to sleep
- Avoid caffeine in drinks before bedtime as caffeine can act as a stimulant and keep you awake
- Caffeine also has an effect on the bladder and you may find you need to get up more during the night
- Some people think alcohol can aid falling asleep however it can disrupt normal sleep patterns resulting in more fatigue in the daytime. Plain water is best for night sleeping

Having a regular wake up time in the morning can help to give your sleep pattern structure.

Exercise

- Some light physical activity can help to reduce some of the symptoms of fatigue and has been shown to help some people sleep better.
- This doesn't have to be anything more than a short walk (even around the house) or some of your usual everyday activities
- Simple strengthening exercises, such as standing up and sitting down or going upstairs. Do only what you feel you can
- Light exercise can be slowly built up over time and at your own pace

Being active can help to boost your appetite and give you more energy. It can also improve your general feeling of wellbeing and improve your emotions and motivation.

Tell your doctor or your healthcare professional what impact fatigue is having on your daily life.

Drinks

Try drinking regularly throughout the day to prevent dehydration.

If you can manage some exercise then make sure you drink water to replace fluids lost during exercise.

- Milky drinks or liquid nutritional drinks can also provide you with extra nutrients

Diet and appetite

When we are fatigued we often don't have much of an appetite and therefore shopping for food, preparing, cooking and eating a meal can feel like too much effort.

Your appetite may come and go so when you feel like eating you should make the most of it.

- Eating little and often can be just as nourishing as larger meals and can sometimes be easier to face
- Keep snacks handy
- Microwaving pre-prepared foods or ready meals can save time and effort
- Cold meals are often quicker to prepare and still nutritious
- Softer foods take less effort to eat
- Ask friends or family to help with shopping and cooking
- Avoid having a drink with or immediately before a meal as this will fill you up

If you are experiencing a lack of appetite, speak to your healthcare professional.

- We have dietary advice leaflets which offer ideas to help you to improve your appetite as well as improving your calorie and nutrient intake
- **If you are concerned about weight loss, please ask your doctor or healthcare professional to refer you to the dietitian**

Working

Some people having cancer treatment are able to continue to with work but some people find they need to reduce their hours of work. Some people stop work completely.

Talk to your doctor or healthcare professional for advice about what they think is realistic for you.

Perhaps you may need to consider:

- Having regular rest breaks when at work
- Changing your hours of work or work reduced hours
- Arrange to work from home if possible
- Asking your colleagues to be supportive and help with some of your work
- Asking your employer to do lighter work
- Graduated return to work

Talk to your employer, Human Resources or Occupational Health department.

Further information

Radiotherapy Review Radiographers

Information and support:

Telephone: **0121 371 3553** Monday–Friday

Patrick Room – Cancer Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital

Information and support for people with cancer and their families

Telephone: **0121 371 3537** or **0121 371 3539**

Monday–Friday

Macmillan Cancer Support

Information and cancer support:

Telephone: **0800 808 00 00**

Monday–Friday 09:00–20:00

www.macmillan.org.uk

Radiotherapy

Queen Elizabeth Hospital

Birmingham Mindelsohn Way, Edgbaston

Birmingham, B15 2GW

Telephone: 0121 627 2000

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