

Managing your Fatigue

For People With Cancer

The recommendations in this guide are for people with fatigue related to their cancer diagnosis.

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is extreme tiredness and lack of energy that does not get better with rest or sleep. Fatigue is the most common symptom for people with cancer.

Fatigue can also make you feel:

- Weak, heavy or slow
- Like you cannot think or remember things
- Like you cannot do your activities or see your loved ones

Fatigue can come and go over time and is usually worse when you are getting cancer treatments.

What causes fatigue when you have cancer?

Your fatigue may be caused by a combination of things, such as:

- Cancer treatments (such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy)
- Medications (such as opioids, antihistamines, antidepressants)
- Pain
- Depression, anxiety or emotional distress
- Anemia (low red blood cell count)
- Sleep problems
- Dehydration (not enough fluids in your body)

When to talk to a health care provider about fatigue?

Talk to your health care team at your next appointment about how to manage fatigue if it is causing you distress or interfering with your daily life.

Contact your health care team right away if you **suddenly** feel:

- Dizzy, like you are losing your balance or about to fall
- Shortness of breath or your heart beating fast
- Confused, having more difficulty thinking clearly or concentrating

There is no medication that is recommended for cancer fatigue. Your health care team can help you come up with a plan to manage your fatigue with other strategies.

How to manage your fatigue

Start with small changes and set easy, realistic goals.

If you have advanced cancer, speak with your health care provider for help managing fatigue. Some of the advice in this guide may not be useful for people with advanced cancer.

Exercise during and after your cancer treatment

Regular exercise or movement is one of the best things to help fatigue from cancer. Resting too much when you have fatigue can make it worse.

Regular exercise or movement:

- gives you more energy
- improves your mood
- strengthens your muscles and balance

If you had an exercise routine before your cancer treatments, check with your health care team to make sure it is safe to continue.

If you are just starting to move your body more often, try to:

- Start slowly with something like walking at a mall or walking your dog
- Start with 5 to 10 minutes of movement and repeat this throughout the day
- Over time add to how long you move and make your movements more challenging
- Aim for about 30 minutes of movement a day, 5 times a week
- Keep track of your progress with a journal or a step tracker

If you struggle with standing or balance, try:

- seated yoga or Pilates
- using an indoor exercise bike
- using an arm cycle or resistance bands
- swimming or water aerobics

BE SAFE!

- Stop and rest if you ever feel sore, stiff or out of breath
- Talk to your health care team if you have metastatic cancer in your bones

Save your energy when you can

The strategies below can help you conserve energy so you can get the most out of your day.

Plan your activities

- Make a daily list of activities to get done including fun things and tasks you need to do
- Put the activities that are most important to you at the top of your list and do them first
- Re-arrange or get rid of tasks as needed
- Listen to your body and stop if you get too tired

Pace your activities based on your energy level

- Break your activities down into smaller tasks instead of doing them all at once
- Alternate activity with rest, for example 10 minutes of activity and then 10 minutes of rest
- Do your most important tasks when you have the most energy
- Plan rest days after a day when you have a lot of activities or outings

Use supports or devices to make activities easier

- Use walking aids, such as handrails, grab bars, a cane or walker

- Use “reachers” for grabbing things and rolling carts for moving things around
- Keep the household items you use every day in easy-to-reach places

Eating and drinking to keep up your strength

- Focus on protein and getting as many nutrients as you can
 - Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day
 - Choose more protein foods like chicken, fish, nuts and beans for muscle strength
- Stay hydrated
 - Drink 6-8 glasses of water or unsweetened, clear drinks every day (unless you have been told to drink less)
 - Avoid caffeinated drinks like coffee, tea and cola
- Ask to speak to a dietitian if you need help with eating and drinking

Make preparing food as easy you can:

- Cook when you have the most energy
- Make extra food to keep in the freezer
- Buy healthy but convenient food (like pre-cut fruits and vegetables)
- Ask family and friends to bring you meals or do your shopping – people are often looking for ways to help

Improve your sleep

Getting good sleep is important when you have fatigue. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping. For more information, review our sleep guide.

Where to get more information

The Canadian Cancer Society is a trusted source of information.

Visit them at cancer.ca or phone 1-888-939-3333

For more information on this symptom, or for guides to help manage other symptoms, please visit cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management.

The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus.

Ontario Health's patient guides provide information on managing cancer-related symptoms. They should be used for information only and do not replace medical advice. These guides do not include all information available about managing cancer-related symptoms. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information contained in our patient guides does not create a physician-patient relationship between Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) and you.

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