

This information explains cancer-related fatigue, its causes and some ideas for managing it.

What is the difference between fatigue and tiredness?

Fatigue is often confused with tiredness. Tiredness happens to everyone - it is an expected feeling after activity or at the end of the day. Usually you know why you are tired and a good night's sleep solves the problem.

Fatigue is over-whelming tiredness (physical and emotional) not relieved by rest or sleep.

What is cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer and its treatment. It can happen to anyone, with any type of cancer, at any time during or after treatment.

For patients and carers, the fatigue associated with cancer treatments can be overwhelming. The symptoms can range from mild to severe and be so disruptive it can make daily activities hard to do.

The reason for this fatigue is often unknown, but it is thought to have a combination of causes.

These could include:

- the cancer itself
- lack of sleep or appetite
- psychological effects of cancer
- pain
- other health problems that you may already have.

Side effects of treatment such as nausea, vomiting, mouth ulcers, taste changes, heartburn or diarrhoea can increase the feelings of fatigue.

Other things that may add to cancer-related fatigue

Infection - This needs to be taken seriously as chemotherapy can weaken your body's immune system (your body's ability to fight off infections).

Seek urgent medical attention immediately if you:

- have a temperature of 38 and above
- feel unwell
- feel hot or cold,
- have chills, shivers or shakes.

It is important to follow the advice given to you from your cancer treatment team.

Anaemia - Anaemia is when there is not enough haemoglobin (a substance in red blood cells that carries oxygen around the body) in your blood. Anaemia can cause fatigue but it is treatable.

Medications - Some medications used to treat side effects (such as nausea, pain, depression, anxiety and seizures) can cause fatigue, as can some medications for other conditions you might have.

Pain - Dealing with pain can make you feel very tired. Good pain control can help.

Stress/Anxiety - Stress and anxiety can increase fatigue levels. You may find counseling or relaxation exercises useful. The Cancer Society has two relaxation programmes available on our website www.cancernz.org.nz:

- <http://tinyurl.com/hlh96uf>
- <http://tinyurl.com/hfzwlko>

Depression - Depression and fatigue sometimes go together. If your mood is low, and you have lost interest in things you used to enjoy, you may benefit from treatment for depression. Speak to your GP if you are concerned about this.

Interrupted sleep - Interrupted sleep can occur due to pain, being in hospital, worry and nausea.

What can I do about fatigue?

- **Be aware of your own warning signs of fatigue:** for example a loss of appetite, low mood, difficulty concentrating.
- **Help others to understand and let them support you.** Talk to family and friends and don't be afraid to ask for help. Be specific so people know what they can do to help you .
- **Consider your energy levels** - it is important to create a balance between activity and rest.
- If you need time to rest during the day don't be afraid to say no to visitors.
- **Other things that may help include:** planning ahead and pacing yourself, increased fluid intake, having plenty of nutritious snacks to hand.

Nutrition

Cancer-related fatigue is often made worse if you are not eating enough or not eating the right foods. Eat as well as you can. There is good advice in the Cancer Society booklet

Eating Well During Cancer Treatment / Kia Pai Te Kai I Te Wā Maimoatanga Matepukupuku on our website www.cancernz.org.nz .

- Try to eat a wide variety of healthy foods, including protein.
- Make sure you drink plenty of fluid every day. You will need more fluid if you have side effects such as vomiting and diarrhoea.
- If you are concerned about your weight or you are struggling to eat or keep fluids down it is important to discuss this with your treatment team or GP.

Exercise

There is evidence that exercise helps reduce cancer-related fatigue. Regular moderate exercise can lessen feelings of tiredness and a lack of energy. During cancer treatment it can be possible to continue gentle exercise.

- Talk to your GP before beginning an exercise programme.
- Start slowly, allowing your body time to adjust.
- Most exercises are safe as long as you exercise with care and don't overdo it.
- Gentle exercise activities include walking, and cycling.
- Some gyms can provide a specialised programme for people with cancer.

Support

- Tell your treatment team if fatigue is affecting you. Don't just assume there is nothing that could help and that you just have to put up with it.
- Talk to a counsellor.
- Connect with others going through the same thing. You could join a support group or an online support group or chat room, such as CancerChatNZ www.cancerchat.org.nz
- Talk with your religious or spiritual advisor.

How long fatigue might last

Cancer-related fatigue may begin to lift when treatment ends, but many people will continue to feel fatigued for some time after treatment is finished. It is not uncommon for fatigue to go away only to return again. You may be frustrated if your recovery takes longer than you expected. Try to be patient with yourself.

Recommended readings and websites

- Cancer Society of New Zealand: www.cancernz.org.nz
- Macmillan Cancer Support: www.macmillan.org.uk
- Living well beyond breast cancer by Dr Marisa Weiss and Ellen Weiss, Three Rivers Press, United States of America, 2nd edition
- Before and after cancer treatment by Dr Julie K. Silver, John Hopkins University Press, United States of America, 2015
- Surviving after cancer: living the new normal by Dr Anne Katz, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, United States of America, 2011
- Life after treatment <https://www.petermac.org/services/cancer-information-resources/survivorship-life-after-treatment>