

Fatigue in Survivorship

Feeling tired or easily worn out after cancer treatment is complete is one of the most common symptoms that cancer survivors experience. People often describe this as being tired, weak, or lacking energy and it can profoundly reduce quality of life. Sometimes, rest or sleep does not help your fatigue and medical providers do not understand its exact causes. The reasons for fatigue are different for people who have completed cancer therapy (i.e. chemotherapy, immunotherapy, radiation, or surgery) compared to people who are actively undergoing treatment. While people are actively receiving cancer treatment, the fatigue may be caused by the cancer therapy or other issues like not drinking enough fluids, pain, obesity, poor nutrition, anemia (having low red blood cells), poor sleep, lack of exercise or depression. However, researchers have still not been able to find out exactly why people feel tired after treatment is completed.

There is no timeline for when the fatigue will get better. For some people, the fatigue gets better over time. For others, like those who have had bone marrow transplants, the fatigue may last for years afterwards.

Often times, it is easy for people to be frustrated when their fatigue lasts longer than they expect or affects their ability to do day-to-day activities. They may also be concerned that their fatigue will negatively affect the relationships around them if they complain to their friends, family, or coworkers about their symptoms. This can be very discouraging but it is normal, and recovering from cancer, cancer treatment, and its side effects take time.

How are the symptoms of fatigue managed?

It is important for your medical provider to ask about your symptoms, medicines, and daily activities. They may also need to perform blood tests or order other testing to check for treatable conditions that may be causing your fatigue, such as checking your blood counts, iron levels, vitamin D levels, or thyroid hormone levels. They may also make sure you don't have any sleep disorders like obstructive sleep apnea.

You can also ask about:

- If any of your medical problems or medicines that you are taking may be contributing to your fatigue
- How to control your pain if you experience pain
- Making changes to your diet or drinking more fluids
- Exercise programs, like walking
- Relaxation skills, like meditation or deep breathing
- Medicines or nutritional supplements that may help
- Specialists that may help you, such as nutritionists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, or mental health providers

What can I do to reduce the symptoms of fatigue?

- Eating a healthy, well-balanced diet and avoiding processed, high-calorie foods, foods with little nutritional value, or foods high in saturated fats or added sugars
- Exercise is one of the most effective ways to combat fatigue – cancer survivors should aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week. Aerobic or strength-building exercise is helpful to improve symptoms of fatigue
- Play your day - be active at the time of day when you feel most energetic and schedule a few short rest breaks between activities
- Listen to your body. Take a nap when you feel tired and save your energy when you can. For example, sit on a stool when you cook or wash dishes.
- Try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.
- If you have difficulty sleeping, doing gentle yoga with breathing exercises may help people feel less tired and have better quality sleep at night.
- Stay hydrated with fluids throughout the day
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon or evening, and limit alcohol.
- Do what you enjoy, but in moderation. Engage in new or old interests that do not tire you out.
- Let others help you with giving you a ride, cooking a meal, doing laundry, or picking up something at the store. If nobody offers, reach out and ask for your needs. Family and friends may want to help but do not know how to.
- Don't be afraid to say "no" to things that do not matter as much to you now, such as housework or other chores. You can live a fuller life by using the energy you have in more rewarding things.
- Consider joining a support group for people with cancer. Talking about your fatigue with people who share the same difficulty can help you learn new ways to cope.
- Stay connected. Keep in touch with friends and family and consider joining a support group for cancer survivors.

These are some suggestions for coping with fatigue which is a common symptom among cancer survivors. However, if you are having a difficult time managing, please speak with your health care provider.

When Should You Call Your Healthcare Team?

If you experience any of the following symptoms, call your healthcare team:

- Feel dizzy or weak
- Have trouble breathing
- Are so tired that you cannot do your daily activities like bathing, getting dressed, or eating