Occupational Therapy

Managing your fatigue

A practical guide for people with cancer and their families

The Ottawa Hospital | L'Hôpital d'Ottawa
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What is cancer-related fatigue?

People with cancer can feel very worn out and tired as a result of their cancer or its treatment. In fact, fatigue is the most frequently experienced symptom for people with cancer. Cancer-related fatigue is defined as a condition in which a person with cancer experiences an overwhelming and sustained sense of exhaustion and has a decreased capacity for physical and mental work. These situations of fatigue are not relieved by rest. Although extreme tiredness is central to the syndrome of cancer-related fatigue, others may describe their fatigue as a sense of weakness, drowsiness, inability to concentrate, or a feeling of depression.

Which of the following complaints do you have regarding your fatigue?

• feeling weak and tired
• lacking energy
• difficulty staying awake, excessive yawning
• feeling unrested, even after waking up
• difficulty concentrating
• poor memory
• feeling unable to do enjoyable activities
• loss of interest in people and things around you
• feelings of hopelessness
• loss of appetite
• lack of interest in sex
• irritability, or mood swings
Fatigue may affect you differently than another person, and may include any or all of the above complaints, at some point during your cancer experience. What would a reasonable goal be for you in dealing with cancer-related fatigue? Here are some ideas:

- To reduce my level of fatigue.
- To use my energy as effectively as possible.
- To keep regular routines of sleep and rest.

_Do you have any goals of your own in learning to deal with fatigue_?
What causes fatigue for people with cancer?

Cancer and its treatments can drain a person’s energy. This results in an imbalance of energy states, such that more energy is being used than is being replaced. The exact cause of cancer-related fatigue is unclear, however the following are possible contributors:

• Cancer may cause your body to become overactive in order to deal with the disease, so that it requires more energy.

• Your body may need to use extra energy to rid itself of cells killed by treatment.

• Malnutrition is caused when energy requirements of your body exceed the supply of energy.

• Some cancers, e.g., lung cancer, directly affect the person’s ability to breathe properly, causing fatigue.

• Anemia may be caused by cancer, chemotherapy or nutritional problems, reducing the number of red blood cells and hemoglobin available to bring oxygen to the body.

• Fatigue may be exacerbated by disturbed rest or sleep patterns if a person with cancer is feeling depressed or is in pain.

• Deconditioning, due to inadequate exercise, poor nutrition, and bedrest, may lead to decreased strength and endurance. This in turn can cause further fatigue, resulting in an expanding cycle of fatigue.

Cancer treatments themselves can result in fatigue:

• Radiation therapy results in cumulative fatigue, peaking between the completion of therapy and four weeks after treatment has ended.

• Chemotherapy may also result in fatigue, peaking usually four or five days after treatment when blood counts are dropping.
What time of day is your fatigue the:
worst? ___________________ best? _______________

What worsens your feelings of fatigue?
_________________________________________________________________________________________

On a scale of 0 to 10, (0 indicating no fatigue/full of energy and 10 indicating worst fatigue and lack of energy), what is your fatigue rating right now? __________

At the worst in the past week? ________________________________

At its best in the past week? ________________________________

What can I do about my fatigue?
Managing your fatigue is in part about managing your energy reserves. A balance needs to be maintained between energy spent and energy saved. When a person is experiencing fatigue, it is important to decrease energy expenditures and increase energy reserves in order to rebalance one’s available energy.

Here are some ideas for you to consider, to help you to reduce your energy expenditures. They are called Principles of Energy Conservation.

Prioritize:
To help in deciding which activities are most important for you to spend your energy on, consider the following:
• Which tasks are most important to me each day?
• Which tasks are unnecessary, and which can I delegate to others?
• Which tasks can I do differently so I use less energy?

Plan:
Careful planning will help you to reduce stress, and conserve energy in your daily activities. Remember to:
• Plan to perform activities that require the most energy at the time of day that you have the most energy available.
• Try not to do too much on any given day, planning ahead for the week’s activities as much as possible.

Pacing:
Balance periods of rest with periods of activity, throughout your day. Remember that:
• You may need to rest during an activity.
• You may wish to allow yourself a little extra time to get things done.
**Positioning:**
In most cases, sitting when performing activities uses considerably less energy than standing. Think about:
- Sitting to complete tasks that you normally do from standing.
- Equipment that can help to improve your posture or ergonomics during household or work activities.

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**Decreasing energy expenditures**
Using these principles of energy conservation, let’s have a look at how they can be applied to your activities of daily living. Some specific suggestions follow, but you may think of other ideas to help to reduce the energy you expend during the day:

**Self-care: (washing, dressing, grooming)**
- Arrange required items before you begin, for example, carry all items to the bathroom at the same time.
- Choose clothing that is easy to put on, including low-heeled, slip on shoes, and tops with no buttons.
- Avoid bending at the waist: bring feet up or use long-handled equipment (shoe horn, or reacher for example) instead.
- When washing/dressing, care for your feet and legs first as this is the most energy consuming. Stand up only once to pull up your clothing.
- Use a terry cloth robe to dry off.
• Consider equipment such as a raised toilet seat, bath bench or grab bars.

• Use long handles brushes/combs to avoid holding arms over the head.
• Fasten bra in front first, then twist it to the back.

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**Home maintenance:**

• Do a little bit each day, spreading tasks throughout the week.
• Delegate heavy work or hire help, consider using a delivery service.
• Use a cart or apron to carry supplies, rather than lifting them.
• Sit to do tasks whenever possible.
• Use lightweight equipment and labour saving devices (trolleys, blenders, long handled duster, etc.).
• When necessary, use disposable towels or plates to assist with large clean-ups.
• Avoid heavy, upright vacuum and use a lighter option instead (e.g., carpet sweeper).

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Workplace:
• Organize the day in order to stay on one floor for the majority of the day, minimizing use of stairs.
• Put frequently used items in easy to reach places.
• Alternate heavy work with light work throughout the day.
• Take several short breaks instead of one longer one.
• Plan workload around the most productive part of your day.

Increasing energy reserves
In addition to conserving energy by reducing expenditures, one can obtain more energy by making healthy lifestyle choices. Here are some ideas:

Nutrition:
• Food supplies you with your energy. Even when you do not have a good appetite, it is important to maintain an appropriate caloric and protein intake.

• Plan nutritious, easy to prepare meals.
• Cook several portions at the same time and freeze them for days when fatigue is worst. Ask family and neighbours to bring food, or call a community meals program to deliver balanced meals.
• Eat more during the times of the day when you are most hungry, supplementing your meals with snacks.
• Eat a well-balanced diet from the four food groups of the Canadian Food Guide (dairy, fruit and vegetables, breads and cereals, and protein).
• Limit your intake of alcohol, and caffeine. Drink plenty of other liquids, as dehydration can cause fatigue.
• Consult a dietitian if you have questions or concerns.

Sleep:
• Keep as active as possible during the day so that normal fatigue sets in at night.
• Assume usual patterns of rest and sleep.
• When you are tired during the day, taking short naps may help reduce fatigue.
• Engage in a relaxing activity (soft music, meditation, relaxation, warm bath) before going to sleep.
• Keep the temperature cool for night time.
• Block out daytime light with darkening blinds, or use a sleepmask.
• Aim for at least eight hours sleep each night.

Exercise and activity:
Although exercise may at first glance appear to be a consumer of energy, it actually reduces fatigue by increasing strength and endurance, and preventing deconditioning. Other positive effects of being active include cardiovascular fitness, weight
management, and stress reduction. The following guidelines may help you to get started:

• The recommended type of activity uses large muscle groups to raise the heart rate, and may include light activities (gardening, walking), moderate activities (brisk walking or hiking) and more vigorous activities (jogging, cycling or dancing).

• It is recommended that you avoid moderate or heavy physical activity on the days you have blood tests or receive chemotherapy.

• Flexibility and muscle strengthening activities are also important to consider.

• Duration is recommended to be from 20 to 60 continuous minutes, performed three to five times per week. However, shorter periods of activity, done three times per day, can also be helpful.

• Be sure to check with your doctor before beginning any exercise program.

**Manage your stress!**

Ineffective stress management contributes to muscle tension, sleeplessness, and fatigue. It is important to identify and manage your stress in order that you can better manage your fatigue. Here are some tips to help get you started on managing the stress in your life:

1. Recognize your symptoms of stress.

2. Look at your lifestyle and see what can be changed—in your work situation, your family situation, or your schedule. Adopt a problem solving approach.

3. Use relaxation techniques—yoga, meditation, deep breathing, massage.

4. Exercise—physical activity is one of the most effective stress remedies around!
5. Time management—do essential tasks and prioritize the others, delegate.

6. Watch your diet—alcohol, caffeine, sugar, fats and tobacco all put a strain on your body’s ability to cope with stress.

7. Get enough rest and sleep.

8. Talk with others—talk with friends, professional counsellors, support groups or relatives about what is bothering you.

9. Help others—volunteer work can be an effective and satisfying stress reducer.

10. Get away for awhile—read a book, watch a movie, play a game, listen to music or go on vacation. Leave yourself some time that’s just for you.

11. Work off your anger—get physically active, dig in the garden, start a project.

12. Avoid unnecessary quarrelling—take a deep breath!

13. Tackle one thing at a time—don’t try to do too much at once.

14. Don’t try to be perfect—accept that you may not be able to manage what you used to.

15. Ease up on criticism of others, and accept offers of help.

16. Don’t be too competitive.

17. Make the first move to be friendly.

18. Have some fun! Laugh, and be with people you enjoy!

19. Educate yourself. Use the internet, go to a library.

20. Get in touch with your spirituality, find meaning and harmony in your life. Set a goal.

(Adapted from Coping with Stress, a publication of the Heart and Stroke Foundation and Canadian Mental Health Association, 1997.)
If your plan for managing your fatigue does not seem to work, ask yourself if you are expecting change too fast. It usually takes time to work out ways to deal with fatigue.

You may wish to further discuss your fatigue with your doctor, nurse or other health care provider.

Your occupational therapist’s name is:

_____________________________________________________________

References:

• Coping with Stress, a publication of the Heart and Stroke Foundation and Mental Health Association, 1997
• How People with Cancer can Handle fatigue, publication of CANO with support of Janssen-Ortho Inc.
• www.cancercare.org
• www.cancer.ca
• www.breastcancer.org

Goal-setting for change

Here is your opportunity to gather thoughts about your fatigue, and to set some goals for yourself to help to make some changes. Try to include items from the section on Decreasing energy expenditures, as well as Increasing energy savings.

Remember to make your goals SMART, that is:

Specific – Aim to be specific in terms of the types of changes you are trying to achieve.

Measurable – Indicate how you will measure your success in making the change.

Attainable – Set yourself up with realistic goals, habits take some time to change!

Reward yourself – What will be your reward for making the needed changes?
Timely – When do you aim to have successfully reached your goals?

Goals:
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