

Most people with cancer must cope with their disease and with the side effects of their cancer treatment. **Fatigue** is a side effect of many cancer treatments.



## What is fatigue?

While most people know what it's like to feel tired, fatigue is much more than the normal feeling of being tired at the end of the day. Fatigue is when you feel so tired that even sleep does not make you feel better.

Fatigue is when you get tired very quickly, just from doing normal things. Sometimes, you may feel tired even when you are not doing anything. You may feel tired all the time.

You may have a hard time doing things you used to do each day, such as housework, taking a shower, or cooking. You may find it hard to walk or talk –

or even to think! You may not be able to make decisions. Sometimes, you just don't feel like yourself. Other things that may make you feel very tired and weak are:

- any change to your normal routine
- any change to your sleep patterns
- any change in your eating habits
- depression
- worry (or anxiety)
- stress
- a low hemoglobin level (anemia).

## What causes fatigue?

1. Many people with cancer say that they feel very, very tired. Cancer and cancer treatments can cause fatigue.

In fact, fatigue is one side effect of cancer treatments that is very hard to treat. This may be because so many things may add to your feelings of fatigue, such as:

- being under a lot of stress, due to cancer and the cancer treatments
- being worried
- feeling sad
- dealing with conflict, and
- feeling tension within your family.

2. One of the most common causes of fatigue is **anemia**. Anemia is when you do not have enough red blood cells. If you have this problem, you are **anemic**.

Your red blood cells contain **hemoglobin**, which carries oxygen from your lungs to your tissues and cells. Your body needs oxygen to survive and give you energy.

When you do not have enough red blood cells, you have less hemoglobin to carry oxygen throughout your body. This means that the tissues in your body do not get enough oxygen to do their work. This can make you feel tired or weak, and you may look pale.



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## How can I cope with my fatigue?

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- Talk with your doctor or nurse about how you feel. Find out if there are ways to get rid of your fatigue.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about your red blood cell count and your hemoglobin level. If your hemoglobin is low, ask about treatment for anemia.
- Eat food from the four main food groups. Eating small meals often may make you feel better.
- Try to eat grains, vegetables, and foods that have a lot of iron in them. Some foods with iron are eggs, red meat, liver, and spinach. Make sure you drink plenty of water, and other fluids, every day.
- Plan your day so that you have time to rest.
- Rest as often as you need to, by taking short naps and breaks. Short periods of rest are better than long ones. Naps can be helpful as long as they don't cause you to have trouble falling asleep at night.
- Exercise if you can. For example, take short walks or do some light exercise. Check with your doctor about the best type of exercise, and how long and how often you could do it.
- Think about what is causing your stress and ask your family, friends, or health care team for help to deal with it.
- Try to keep your normal sleeping routine. You may still feel tired even if you are getting lots of rest. Try not to get frustrated because this can be a normal part of getting over treatments.
- Keep a record of how you feel each day. Try to reduce or stop doing things that make you feel tired. Keep doing things that make you feel good. Take your daily record with you when you see your doctor. It can help remind you what you want to say when you talk with your doctor.
- Try not to waste energy. Make a plan for each day and follow the plan one step at a time. Keep in mind that you don't have to do everything. Know your limits and listen to your body.
- Find things to keep your mind off how tired you are. For example, reading, listening to music, going to work, taking car rides, or meditating.
- Make sure your body temperature is comfortable. When you are too hot or too cold, you may get tired more quickly.
- Try to keep your social life. Do the things that you really want to do and that make you happy. If you feel very sad or lose hope, talk to your health care team.

## How can my family and friends help me?

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- Ask family and friends to help clean the house, do the laundry, go shopping, and drive you where you need to go.
- Try to involve your family so that they can understand better what you are going through. Ask them to be flexible with plans and take one day-at-a-time.
- Remind them how much your fatigue affects your life. For example, if you are moody, it is most likely because of the fatigue.



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## Questions to ask your health care team

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- Why do I have so little energy?
- Why am I having a hard time thinking and being focused? Is this because of fatigue?
- Is it the cancer or my cancer treatment that is making me so tired?
- What is my hemoglobin level? What does that mean?
- Do I have anemia?
- Are there foods that I should eat to boost my energy level?
- Are there any treatments to help my fatigue?

<b>Remission</b>	When the signs and symptoms of cancer disappear, and no more active cancer cells can be found.
<b>Sarcoma</b>	A type of cancer that starts in muscles, bones, and cartilage.
<b>Stem cell transplant</b>	A type of cancer treatment. It is like a bone marrow transplant, except that you get the stem cells themselves.
<b>Subcutaneous injection</b>	An injection where a needle enters your body just under the skin. (Not the same as <b>intravenous</b> , where the needle goes into a vein.)
<b>Surgical oncologist</b>	A doctor who has special training to operate on people with cancer.
<b>Surgery</b>	An operation.
<b>Transfusion</b>	When blood or blood products go into your body through an intravenous (IV) system (see intravenous injection).
<b>Treatment protocol</b>	A set of instructions that gives all the details about how you will get cancer treatments.
<b>Tumour</b>	A lump or group of cells. A tumour can be either benign (without cancer) or malignant (with cancer).
<b>White blood cells</b>	The body's defense system. White blood cells fight infection by catching and killing germs (bacteria) that get into the blood. <b>Neutrophils</b> are the most common type of white blood cell.
<b>X-rays</b>	A type of radiation used to find out about (or diagnose) medical problems. When x-rays are used at high levels, they can treat some kinds of cancer. This is called radiation therapy.

This fact sheet is meant to support the information that your health care team gives you. It is also meant to encourage you to ask questions to your health care team. This fact sheet does **not** replace any information that your healthcare team gives you.

Living Well With Cancer is a partnership among several people living with cancer, health care professionals, people who represent cancer and professional organizations, and Ortho Biotech. The LWWC partnership gratefully acknowledges the input of the QEII Health Sciences Centre in this fact sheet.

Living Well With Cancer Information Centre

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