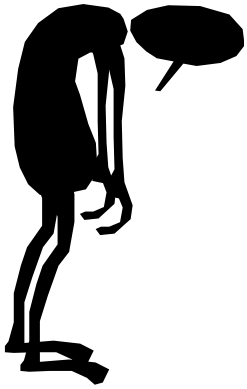
UMDNJ ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON MEDICAL SCHOOL
University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey

The Cancer Institute of New Jersey℠ NCI CCC

December Is Cancer-Related Fatigue Awareness Month



What Is Cancer Related Fatigue?

Cancer related fatigue is a constant feeling of tiredness from cancer or cancer treatment. The tiredness may prevent you from doing your normal, daily activities.

This feeling may range from tiredness to exhaustion and may not be relieved by rest or sleep. Types of fatigue may be physical, mental, or emotional.

What Are the Key Statistics About Cancer Related Fatigue?

Cancer related fatigue is one of the most common and difficult side effects of cancer. It has been reported in 70 – 100% of cancer patients. For some people, it may last for months or years after cancer treatment ends.

What are Signs and Symptoms of Cancer Related Fatigue?

Cancer related fatigue has different meanings to different people. Words that have been used to describe it include:

- listless
- sluggish
- faint
- apathetic
- tired
- no motivation
- exhausted
- pooped
- unable to think
- lack of mental sharpness

Physical activities that you could easily complete may now leave you exhausted. Routine daily activities, such as bathing, can become overwhelming. Cancer related fatigue could make it hard or impossible to meet the everyday needs of family, friends or work responsibilities. For example, making meals or doing the food shopping may become too exhausting. Someone else should take over this job. Although there may be many people to help out, not being able to do the things

you could previously do may be upsetting. There is a very strong relationship between depression and fatigue. Fatigue can lead to depression and depression can lead to fatigue.

Other illnesses may also cause fatigue or make it worse. Pain or other conditions, such as thyroid problems and anemia (low red blood cells), can cause fatigue.

Myths About Cancer Related Fatigue and What Causes It

Many people believe that fatigue is just something you have to live with if you have cancer. This is no longer true. There are many things that can be done to reduce your fatigue.

Cancer related fatigue has many causes and some are easy to change. For this reason, it is important to let your healthcare team know if you are fatigued. The source of your fatigue can then be found by looking at the treatments you are receiving, medications you are taking, your sleep patterns, your daily activity, your blood tests, and your emotional well being. Your fatigue may be related to a medication that can be changed. It may be that your fatigue is caused by anemia (low red blood cells). In this case, your healthcare team can give you medicine to help the anemia. The earlier you let your healthcare team know that you are fatigued, the sooner you will receive help.

Is There a Way to Measure Fatigue?

Only you can measure your sense or feeling of fatigue. There are fatigue surveys that can help find out how tired you are. Based on your answers, a score is given. One very simple tool we use to help track your fatigue is the following scale:

Rate your fatigue on a scale of one to ten. 0 = no fatigue and 10 = worst fatigue ever.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

None **Severe**

If you keep track of the fatigue in a diary, you can see a pattern. If you receive chemotherapy every three weeks and keep a daily record (on the 1 – 10 scale) of the fatigue, sometimes a pattern comes into sight. After a couple of cycles it may become clear from the fatigue diary that your worst fatigue is during the first couple of days after chemotherapy. This is useful information. You can then plan light activities for your bad days and plan activities that need more energy on your good days.

Cancer Related Fatigue During Treatment

- Chemotherapy – As mentioned above, cancer related fatigue during treatment will follow a predictable pattern. Keeping a journal during your first couple of cycles of treatment will probably make it very clear when you can expect the fatigue to be at its worst.

- Radiation Therapy - During radiation therapy, fatigue may get increasingly worse over time. Often times, this fatigue builds up over the entire course of treatment.

- Surgery – Cancer related fatigue after surgery gets better as you recover from the surgery. However, this may be different depending on your body.

- Immunotherapy – Cancer related fatigue in people receiving immunotherapy, such as interferon alpha, can be very difficult. It occurs in almost everyone who receives this medication. There are clear ways of handling this fatigue. The most helpful is staying physically active. Your healthcare team will monitor you closely for fatigue if you are on this therapy.

- Bone Marrow Transplant - Fatigue is expected in the first few months of transplant. Ongoing fatigue may be present years later.

Other Causes of Cancer Related Fatigue

- Poor nutrition - Side effects of treatment and the cancer itself can cause changes in appetite, nausea, diarrhea, mouth sores, or problems with absorbing nutrients. This can all lead to poor nutrition. Eating less food will result in less energy.

- Anemia - Some chemotherapy agents and treatments can cause a decrease in the number of red blood cells in the body. Red blood cells contain hemoglobin, which carry oxygen to the cells of the body. Without oxygen, cells cannot easily make energy, which can result with fatigue.

- Medications - Many medications used to treat other symptoms of cancer or its treatment can cause fatigue. For example, pain medication and medication to prevent nausea can both cause fatigue.

- Emotions - Anxiety and depression are common emotions that cancer patients may have. Both of these emotions can lead to fatigue.

- Symptoms - Pain, nausea, diarrhea, sleep disturbances, and shortness of breath are just a few of the symptoms that are distressful and tiring to cancer patients.

- Activity/Rest Cycle - In some cases, you may not realize that trying to keep your lifestyle the same as it was before your diagnosis may be the cause of fatigue. Frustration trying to keep your previous lifestyle may cause more fatigue.

What Can Be Done to Reduce Fatigue?

The first step in managing cancer related fatigue is to find the most likely cause of the fatigue. This requires you and your healthcare team to look at all the possibilities. The second step is to change what you can.

Tips to Help Manage the Fatigue

Conserve Energy

- Learn to recognize the early warning signs of fatigue such as heavy legs, inability to concentrate, and tired eyes. Rest before exhaustion takes over.

- Once you know the pattern of your fatigue, plan your routine so that you can put rest periods in place before you expect to experience fatigue. Pace yourself throughout the day.

- Prioritize what is most important for you to do. Have others do your remaining tasks for you. Do not be afraid to ask for help!

- Try to avoid getting too hot or too cold.

- Arrange your tasks to preserve energy. Use good body mechanics and avoid rushing.

Nutrition Is Energy

- Maintain optimum body weight. If you are losing or gaining weight, ask to speak with the dietician.

- Drink plenty of fluids, at least eight to ten glasses per day. This can be juice, milk, soups, gelatin, or water.

- Make an effort to eat at least three meals a day. You can also try eating six small meals throughout the day.

Exercise

- Physical activity and rest should be balanced in order to lessen fatigue. Some physical activity should be in the form of exercise. Scientists have found that decreased physical activity can lead to fatigue. Doing exercise can actually increase energy and relieve fatigue.

- All patients should talk to their healthcare team before starting an exercise program. For safety and the most benefit from exercise, you should obtain an exercise program made just for you from an exercise specialist. Ask your healthcare team for further information about an exercise specialist.

Relaxation

- For some people, relaxation exercises, listening to music, spending time in quiet natural settings, attending support groups, and reading are ways that can help lessen your fatigue.

Fatigue Prevention Clinical Trials

For more information about nationwide cancer prevention trials, you can call the National Cancer Institute at 1-800-4 CANCER or visit their Web site at www.cancer.gov.

Where Can I Find Further Information?

The Resource and Learning Center
732-235-9639
www.cinj.org/rlc

The American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

Cancer*Care*
1-800-813-HOPE (4673)
www.cancercare.org

National Comprehensive Cancer Network
1-215-690-0300
www.nccn.org

National Cancer Institute
1-800-4-CANCER
www.cancer.gov

Oncology Nursing Society
1-866-257-4667
www.ons.org

American Society of Clinical Oncologist
1-703-299-0150
www.asco.org

Cancer.Net
1-888-651-3038
http://www.cancer.net

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