

# Information Sheet: Cancer Treatment & Fatigue

Fatigue is tiredness that cannot be relieved by resting or a good night's sleep. It is the most common side-effect of chemotherapy.

It is often described as a lack of energy or a decreased ability to complete your usual activities. Some people find they can't concentrate well or make decisions; others say it makes them feel irritable or tearful. These are normal reactions to cancer-related fatigue.

Fatigue is complex. It can be due to the cancer itself, cancer treatments, low red blood cell counts (anaemia), loss of appetite or weight loss, pain, feeling sick (nausea), emotional distress and sleep problems.

Treatment-related fatigue usually begins within 24 to 48 hours of having chemotherapy and improves in the days before your next treatment.

Fatigue tends to increase until the third or fourth course of chemotherapy, and then tends to stay about the same until a few weeks after your treatment ends.

Generally your energy levels will return to normal about 3 to 4 months after the end of treatment. If you continue to have problems with fatigue, let your doctor or nurse know, so that they can work with you to find ways to reduce it.

## How can I manage my fatigue?

Light exercise such as walking or gardening helps decrease fatigue. As little as 10 to 15 minutes of exercise each day can help maintain muscle tone and wellbeing.

- ❖ It may be useful to keep a diary noting times of the day when your energy levels are at their highest or lowest. Note what makes you especially tired.
- ❖ Plan your day to take advantage of peak energy times. Rearrange your work area so you can easily access equipment and supplies. Talk to your employer about any changes that may be necessary to manage your fatigue. If necessary, suggest alternative work arrangements and job duties. Seek support: don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- ❖ Decide what is important to you and save your energy for the things you enjoy.
- ❖ Don't be afraid to ask your family and friends for help with the more tiring tasks.

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- ❖ Eat a balanced diet, including plenty of fruit and vegetables. Maintain your energy by eating more frequent, smaller meals or snacks throughout the day. Ask to see a dietician if your taste has changed or you have lost your appetite. Ask others for help with food preparation and shopping.
- ❖ Drink plenty of fluid. This doesn't have to be water, but try to aim for 8 glasses (about 2 litres) of cordial, juice or water each day.
- ❖ Rest when you feel tired. Take short naps during the day, but try to take them early enough in the day so that they don't interfere with your night-time sleep. Mix periods of activity with periods of rest.
- ❖ Distract yourself from the fatigue by listening to music, reading or meeting with friends. As little as 15 minutes of such activities may help improve concentration or memory loss due to cancer-related fatigue. We can help by referring you to our occupational therapist or physiotherapist if you would like.
- ❖ Activities such as breathing exercises and listening to meditation tapes can help make you feel more relaxed, which is important when dealing with fatigue.
- ❖ Join a support group: sharing your feelings with others can ease the burden of fatigue, and you may learn strategies from talking with others about how they have coped.

## Tell your Doctor or Nurse if:

- Feel overwhelmed by your illness and treatment
- Are becoming short of breath
- Feel a loss of balance when walking or getting out of bed or out of a chair or get dizzy
- These symptoms may suggest that your blood cell count is low (anaemia) and you may need a blood transfusion. Being anaemic can make you feel very tired.

**We encourage you to speak with your healthcare team if you have any concerns about fatigue during your treatment.**

We welcome feedback at:

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**Bairnsdale Regional Health Service is located on the traditional land of the Gunai Kurnai people.**

*My team* **is** **BRHS**