

# Fatigue and Fatigue Management

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## What is fatigue and fatigue management?

Fatigue is a very common symptom experienced by people with any cancer diagnosis and studies show that between 70-100% of people undergoing treatment for cancer experience fatigue at some stage. The level of fatigue can vary according to the type of condition and treatment and can be a short term experience or last for many months after treatment.

## What causes fatigue?

Research into fatigue has increased over the past 10 years to enable us to know a little more about it and how to help people experiencing it to manage it. The conclusive causes are as yet unclear but it is influenced by:

- Effects of cancer
- Effects of treatment
- Other existing medical conditions
- Exacerbation of symptoms of other medical conditions
- Other factors (worry about family, finances, work, etc.).

## What effects does fatigue have?

- **Physical** – Overwhelming feeling of tiredness, lower energy levels, need to slow down normal pace, general sense of “sluggishness”, more need for sleep and rest
- **Sensory** – May feel more pain due to muscle stiffness if not moving around so much and activity levels are lower
- **Cognition** – May be difficult to concentrate, hard to focus attention on things, be difficult to remember things, feel overloaded.
- **Behaviour** – May avoid going out or engaging in usual activities due to the anticipation of feeling even more fatigued, seeing less of family and friends, accepting fewer responsibilities at work, reducing work hours, taking extra days off
- **Emotions** – May cause feelings of frustration, irritation, and some people express concern over never feeling “normal” again or feeling like no-one really understands. The severity of fatigue may change from day to day. Usually people experience “ups and downs” but it may also be linked to any other symptoms e.g. pain, nausea, vomiting. Everyone feels fatigued at some stage but when this persistently affects daily activities it can then become a problem.

## How is fatigue managed?

The good news is that whilst the fatigue cannot be taken away entirely there are a number of strategies that can be used to help manage it. Most of the non-pharmacological interventions for fatigue are concerned with helping people to manage their fatigue to enable them to feel more in control of this symptom rather than fatigue “ruling” their lives. As a starting point, it is useful to see if there are any patterns to your fatigue and it may be helpful to note how you are feeling down on a day to day basis. The strategies that can help with managing fatigue are:

- Having information and talking about it
- Exercise
- Trying to manage anxiety and stress
- Changing ways of doing things and conserving energy
- Getting a balance of activity, rest and sleep
- Nutritional interventions
- ‘Restorative experiences’ (Ahlberg et al 2003)

## Exercise

Graded and regular exercise has been shown to improve the symptoms of fatigue. It is best to find a level of activity / exercise that you can manage on a daily basis and that you enjoy doing. Doing exercise can also improve the way you feel and your sense of well being and can stimulate your appetite. Often the anticipation of feeling more fatigue can put people off doing any kind of exercise or activity but it is important to keep the body working as efficiently as possible and exercise is a very good way of doing this.

## Trying to manage anxiety and stress

It is normal for our bodies to experience some degree of anxiety and these feelings are caused by the body preparing itself to perform (known as “fight or flight”). Imagine you are crossing a road, when you notice a car coming towards you. It is this response that helps you to get out of the way. So some level of anxiety is useful. However, when this anxiety begins to affect life to an extent where you are experiencing unpleasant symptoms and unable to do what you want to do, it is helpful to understand the reasons why this is happening so that you are able to address these difficulties. To help control anxiety it may be useful to:

- Recognise what triggers your anxiety – are there certain situations that make you feel more anxious?
- Write down the kinds of things that worry or concern you
- Try not to worry about future events, concentrate on the present
- Try to identify problems and solve them one at a time
- Mention how you are feeling to health professionals
- Learn a way of relaxing that works for you

## Changing ways of doing things and conserving energy

It is important to keep a balance between activity and rest and alternate the type of activities that you do in your day so that you are not trying to do too many strenuous things at once. Use your energy on the things that you really want to do so this means deciding what your priorities are. Pacing yourself may sound easy, but in reality it is incredibly difficult as it requires changing habits and routines developed over many years. It is important to obtain a balance between activity and rest. Sometimes people make take the “all or nothing” approach which means that you usually go “all out” on a good day to make the most of the energy you have, leaving nothing in reserve and often resulting in the next day (or maybe days) feeling completely exhausted to the point that you are unable to carry out any activities. With this pattern of activity, there are two extremes, so you need to try to do a little less on your “good days” to enable you to achieve more on your “not so good” days – with the overall effect of you being able to do slightly more over time, with a more balanced rate of activity. On the other hand, some people feel so apprehensive about being fatigued that they begin to avoid engaging in activity.

Fatigue can make you feel less motivated to keep active, which means that often you avoid activities. This can lead to you having less energy, which in turn can make you more tired. When this behaviour becomes a habit, the cycle can often be difficult to break. With this pattern of behaviour, the principle of balancing activity and rest still applies and you need to try to gradually reintroduce activities in to your life. It is helpful to consider: Planning – Consider which times of the day are best for you, avoid unnecessary exertion and try to space activities out during the week and not cram it all in to one day Pacing – Getting a balance between activity and rest. It is better to take a little extra time to complete a task and be able to continue then to finish a task quickly and feel too tired to do anything else. Prioritise – Think about the things that are important to you and what you want to spend your energy on. Imagine having a jug of energy each day. This is topped up overnight. What would you like to use your energy on? Remember not to empty the jar completely – leave something in reserve:

- Getting a balance of activity, rest and sleep
- Try to have a regular sleep / wake pattern
- Try to avoid sleeping during day
- Keep as active as possible during daytime
- Try to identify problems and worries well before going to bed
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol before bedtime
- Have your room at a comfortable temperature – maybe keep a window open

## Nutritional interventions

If you are worried about your nutritional intake discuss this with your doctor, nurse or healthcare professional. If your appetite is poor, it might be worth trying to:

- Try to drink plenty of fluids
- Try having smaller portions
- Eat at times when your appetite is best

## Restorative experiences

It is thought that by engaging in activities and experiences that are enjoyable and relaxing, this can help to break the cycle of lethargy and help a return to what feels a more normal way of living. Restorative experiences such as listening to relaxing music, taking a walk in the garden, participating in art and crafts is thought to help combat cognitive and emotional elements of fatigue. It is worth taking time to think about activities that you enjoy and would like to do and try to get back into doing some of these where possible.

## Mental exhaustion

- Inform others when feeling overwhelmed or overloaded
- Try to cut out any distractions
- Write lists for activities e.g. shopping
- Keep a diary to help remember plan for the day and week
- Art / craft / gardening activities can help you to feel refreshed mentally

## Setting & working on your goals

- Decide what you want to do – concentrate on 1 goal at a time
- Break the goal into smaller parts
- Make an action plan
- Ensure your goal is realistic
- Carry out the action plan
- Review the plan
- Reward yourself Fatigue is often under reported or taken for granted. Whilst not taking away the fatigue completely, there are ways in which you can manage it.

## References

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