



Dana-Farber
Cancer Institute



**BRIGHAM AND
WOMEN'S HOSPITAL**

DANA-FARBER/BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S CANCER CENTER

Fatigue

Understanding fatigue

Fatigue is feeling tired: physically, mentally, and emotionally. It means that you have less energy to do the things you normally do or want to do.

The fatigue that comes with cancer is different from the fatigue of daily life that you might have experienced before your cancer. Unlike “normal” fatigue, cancer-related fatigue may not go away with rest.

It is important to note that cancer-related fatigue is *not* necessarily a sign of disease progression or recurrence. Fatigue is a common symptom that many cancer patients experience during treatment and for some time afterward. However, certain lifestyle modifications, such as exercise, sleep hygiene, and good nutrition, can help you feel less tired.

Why does it happen?

Cancer fatigue may be caused by many factors, which can differ from person to person.

Possible causes for your fatigue include:

- **Your cancer.** Cancer can cause changes to your body that can lead to fatigue. For example, some cancers release proteins called cytokines, which are thought to cause fatigue.
- **Cancer treatment.** Chemotherapy, radiation and other treatments can cause fatigue.
- **Other conditions.** Other conditions can cause fatigue, including hormonal changes, anemia, pain, emotional difficulties, lack of sleep, and inadequate nutrition.

What are some things I can do right now to improve my fatigue?

Exercise

It may require considerable effort to get up and move around but increasing your physical activity may be the most effective way to reduce fatigue. Research has shown that people with cancer who exercise regularly have 40% to 50% less fatigue. If you don't have specific exercise restrictions, here are some tips on getting started:

- Start slowly, set a goal, and increase your exercise bit by bit, based on what you feel you can do. For example, you might take a 10-minute walk each day this week and increase it by 5 minutes each week. Aim to eventually exercise about 30 minutes each day.
- If you don't have the energy to exercise for 30 minutes at a stretch, try breaking up your exercise into manageable “chunks” throughout the day.
- Do the kinds of exercise you enjoy—walking with a friend, dancing, gardening, etc.
- Talk with your doctor to learn about other exercises that can help you.



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Sleep Hygiene

- Wake up and go to sleep at the same time every day.
- Limit caffeine consumption to the morning.
- Limit naps to under 1 hour.
- Eliminate distractions around bedtime, such as television or computers.
- Do something relaxing before bed, such as taking a warm bath.

Use Your Energy Efficiently

- Keep a log of the periods when you are most and least tired every day. Try recording your energy levels on a 1-10 scale each morning, afternoon, and evening.
- Save your energy for activities that are meaningful to you and schedule these activities at times of the day when your energy levels tend to be highest.
- Prioritize your activities and set realistic expectations for what you can do each day.
- Delegate tasks that others can do for you. Don't be too shy or too proud to accept help from someone who can take care of chores when you are not up to it.

Other Strategies

- Meet with a nutritionist who can work with you to ensure that you are getting enough calories, fluids, protein, and other nutrients.