

# Understanding Fatigue

## Understanding the Problem

Chronic fatigue is one of the most common problems for cancer patients. People describe this symptom in many ways: tired, weak, sad, bored, no energy, exhausted, depressed, and unable to concentrate.

Unlike acute fatigue that is relieved with rest, chronic fatigue is related to medical conditions or treatments and is not relieved by rest. Almost all patients have some fatigue after surgery. Many things can cause this: blood loss, bedrest or decreased activity, medicines, and sadness due to diagnosis of cancer.

Fatigue is also a common side effect during and after chemotherapy or radiation therapy. It can last a few weeks or even for several months. Chronic fatigue interferes with your life and simple tasks such as shaving or brushing your teeth may seem impossible to do.

Fatigue is often caused by more than one problem. Two types of approaches are used to manage fatigue.

The first approach is to find any causes for fatigue that can be treated. Some treatable problems that cause fatigue are anemia (low red blood cell counts), emotional distress or depression, sleep difficulties, poor nutrition, pain, and low thyroid gland function.

The second approach is to conserve your energy, cope with stress, and restore your ability to focus.

## Things You Can Do to Reduce Fatigue

- **Use your energy for what is important to you.** List your activities according to how important they are to you when you have the most energy. Keep a diary of peak energy and peak fatigue times to help you plan your day. Establish a structured daily routine that matches your most important activities with the times you have the most energy.
- **Balance rest and activities.** Excessive bed rest promotes weakness. Try to avoid it. Schedule activities so that you have time for short rest periods during the day that do not interfere with your nighttime sleep.
- **Conserve energy during activities of daily living.** Use a shower chair. Wear comfortable clothing and flat shoes. Minimize leaning over. Space your household tasks over the week. Place things that you use often within easy reach to save your energy.

- **Ask for help and delegate tasks when you can.** Many people have friends and family who are willing to help, but don't know what will be helpful to you. If asking for help is stressful, consider asking one person to coordinate the help of others.
- **Eat a well-balanced diet.** Unless you are given other instructions, eat a balanced diet that includes protein (meat, milk, eggs, and beans) and drink about two liters (eight to 10 glasses) of liquids a day. Eat small meals and healthy snacks frequently, rather than fewer large meals. When cooking, make double portions and freeze half. Use nutritious convenience foods. Limit caffeine if you have trouble sleeping at night.
- **Reduce stress and participate in pleasurable activities.** Use methods to reduce stress, such as deep breathing, visual imagery, meditation, prayer, talking with others, participating in a support group, reading, listening to music, painting, or any other activity that gives you pleasure.
- **Exercise.** Light exercise and stretching can help maintain or improve your energy level. Talk to your doctor about starting an exercise program, if appropriate. Try to maintain the level of activity appropriate for your situation.
- **Get other symptoms under control.** Talk to your doctor about how to manage pain, nausea, breathing problems, depression, or any other symptoms that use your energy.
- **Share concerns and needs with family.** Tell your family how you are feeling and what help you need. Teach children to climb up on the lap or into the high chair to avoid lifting. Spend time with children doing quiet activities such as drawing, playing games or computer games, and reading. Get help with more physically demanding childcare needs.