PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue

This information will help you manage cancer-related fatigue during and after your cancer treatment. Fatigue is feeling more tired or weak than usual.

About cancer-related fatigue

Fatigue is the most common side effect of cancer and cancer treatment. Cancer-related fatigue is different from fatigue that people without cancer experience. Cancer-related fatigue usually lasts longer, can be intense, and may not get better with rest.

People describe cancer-related fatigue in many ways, such as:

- Feeling tired or weak.
- Feeling like your arms and legs are heavy.
- Not wanting to do things.
- Not being able to concentrate.
- Feeling irritable.
- Feeling slowed down.

The fatigue can range from mild to severe. It can develop gradually over time, or it can start suddenly, making everyday tasks difficult. It can last for months or years after you finish treatment.

Causes of cancer-related fatigue

No one is sure what exactly causes cancer-related fatigue, but it may be caused by:

- Cancer treatments, including chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, and some biologic therapies
    - Different cancer treatments may have different effects on your energy level. The type and schedule of treatments may affect the amount of fatigue caused by cancer treatment.
- Medicines to treat nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up) and manage pain
- The build-up of toxic substances that are left in your body after cells are killed by cancer
- Injury to normal cells
- A fever above 100.4 °F (38 °C)
- Infection
- Pain
- Dehydration (too little water in your body)
- Loss of appetite or not getting enough calories and nutrients
- Trouble sleeping
- Anemia (low level of red blood cells)
- Shortness of breath
- Being less active
- Other medical conditions

Cancer-related fatigue may also be caused by emotional challenges, such as:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Grief
- Family stress
- Dealing with medical tests and treatments

How to manage cancer-related fatigue

Please visit www.mskcc.org/pe/manage-fatigue-video to watch this video.

There are many things you can do to help manage your fatigue.

Talk with your healthcare provider

The first step is talking with your healthcare provider about what you're feeling. When talking with your healthcare provider, it can be helpful to describe how your fatigue affects your daily activities and routines. For example, saying "I was so tired that I couldn't work for 3 days" is more helpful than saying "I was really tired."

Keep an activity log

When you first start to notice and manage your fatigue, it's helpful to keep an activity log. An activity log is a list of your activities, the time you do them, for how long you do them, and how you feel when you do them. You can use the log at the end of this resource, or you can create your own.

Keeping an activity log can help you notice a pattern to your fatigue. For example, are you more tired right after chemotherapy or just before another treatment? Are you more tired in the afternoon or in the evening? Based on the answers to these and other questions, your healthcare provider will explain how you can manage your fatigue.

Do physical activity and exercise

- Do your best to keep doing your current level of activity. Doing some physical activity for 3 to 5 hours a week may help cancer-related fatigue.
- Walk daily, if your healthcare provider says it's safe for you.
- Think about starting an exercise program that's appropriate for your treatment. Yoga may be helpful to include as part of an exercise program.

If you're worried about doing physical activity or exercise, your healthcare provider can refer you to Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK)'s Rehabilitation Service to meet with a physical therapist (PT) or occupational therapist (OT). Read the section "Meet with an OT or PT" or talk with your healthcare provider to learn more.

Get enough sleep

Try to get continuous sleep at night instead of taking naps during the day. Limit naps to 15 to 20 minutes in late morning or early afternoon so that you still sleep through the night.

Follow a regular routine before bedtime. Tips to improve your sleep routine include:

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco after 6:00 p.m. They may keep you awake.
- Listen to music or read before bedtime. These things can help you relax.
- Try to go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every day.

If you notice changes in your sleep patterns, talk with your healthcare provider. They may be able to help.

Plan your activities

It may help to prioritize what you need to do each day. This will help you save your energy for things that you need to do and most important to you. Schedule important activities when you have more energy.

Try to avoid activities that make you most fatigued. Look at your list of activities and think about how you felt when you did them. Ask for help. Do not be afraid to rely on support from family, friends, or community organizations. Many organizations provide transportation to treatments and help with cooking and cleaning. Ask to speak with a social worker to learn more.

Follow a healthy diet

Eat small, well-balanced meals and snacks throughout the day. Aim to drink 8 to 10 (8-ounce) cups of liquids every day.

To learn more about following a healthy diet, read *Eating Well During Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/eating-cancer-treatment). Talking with a clinical dietitian nutritionist may also be helpful. Your healthcare provider can give you a referral to meet with a clinical dietitian nutritionist.

Keep socially active

Do not cut yourself off from your family or friends. Spending time with them is important, but make sure to pace yourself. There are many ways you can keep in touch with your friends and family, including spending time with them in person, talking on the phone, or sending emails and text messages.

Get emotional support

Your family and friends can help you manage stress and fatigue. You may also want to join a support group for people with cancer. Many people also find that spirituality can help with concerns and worries. You can talk to a chaplain at MSK or ask to see a clergy person.

Get help with anxiety and depression

Tell your healthcare provider if you feel anxious or depressed. They can help you find a social worker or mental health provider who you can talk with.

Complementary therapies, such as relaxation techniques, may also help you manage anxiety. To learn more about complementary therapies, go to www.msk.org/integrative-medicine or call the MSK Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service at 646-449-1010.

Meet with an OT or PT

OTs and PTs are healthcare professionals who can help you manage your fatigue.

- OTs help improve the skills you need for important everyday activities such

as getting dressed, taking a shower, or cooking a meal. An OT can help you plan your activities so you're able to do as many physical activities as possible without getting too tired. They can also suggest ways that you can save energy and help you practice using special equipment or strategies like meditation or mindfulness.

- PTs help improve your ability to move by helping you build your strength and balance. They can also help you come up with an exercise plan that works for you.

OTs and PTs can help you stay motivated and set goals. They can also help you keep track of your energy level and make changes to your exercise plan as needed. If you would like to learn more about how an OT or PT can help you manage your fatigue, ask your healthcare provider for a referral.

Use bright light therapy

Bright light therapy may help reduce cancer-related fatigue.

It may not be right for you if you:

- Have vision loss
- Have an eye disease
- Are sensitive to light

Bright light therapy uses a light box, a device that gives off bright white light. Sit in front of a light box with bright white light at 10,000 lux for 30 minutes each morning. Sit within an arm's length of the light box or follow the distance recommended in the device instructions. The light should shine on your face, but you should not stare directly at the light.

People who use bright light white therapy usually start to feel less fatigued within 1 to 3 weeks of consistent use.

Most people do not have side effects from bright light therapy. If you have side effects, they are usually mild. They may include:

- Eye strain

- Headache
- Nausea

These side effects may improve within minutes to hours after you stop using the light. They usually go away after several days of continued use. If side effects continue, try using the light for a shorter amount of time or sitting father away from it.

You can use bright light therapy at home or while you're at the hospital.

You do not need a prescription for a light box. If you purchase a light box out-of-pocket, you may be able to submit your receipt to your Flexible Spending Account (FSA) to cover the cost. Talk with your healthcare provider to see if bright light therapy is right for you.

Tips for saving your energy

Following the tips in this section can help you save energy when doing your daily activities. This may help with fatigue. If you have questions, talk with your nurse, OT, or PT.

General activities

- Use a transport chair or wheelchair while traveling longer distances.
- Take your time with your activities and sit while you work. Remember to keep breathing normally (do not hold your breath) and stop and rest often if you feel tired.
- Sit on higher seats. They are easier to stand up from than low seats.
- Organize and store your work items where you use them and can get them easily.
- Maintain good posture. Sit up straight and try not to slouch.
- If you need to bend over to reach for something, exhale (breathe out) when you bend over and inhale (breathe in) when you reach.

Showering

- Install grab bars in your shower.
- Use a shower bench to sit in the tub while you shower.
- Use a sponge or brush with a long handle (such as a back brush) to scrub your feet and other areas that may be hard to reach.
- Sit in front of a mirror or sink for activities that take more time, such as putting on makeup or shaving.
- Keep your hair in a style that's easy to care for.

Getting dressed

- Sit on a chair or at the edge of your bed to get dressed.
- Dress the lower part of your body first.
- To put on your socks and shoes, sit and bring your foot to the opposite knee instead of bending over.
- Choose shirts or blouses that button at the front and bottoms that fit loosely. These are easier to get on and off.

Contact information

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

Activity log

Use this activity log to keep track of your activities and how you feel when you do them. Rate your intensity of fatigue on a scale of 1 to 10.

Date	Time	Activity	Length of time	Intensity of fatigue	Comments

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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