



# Reclaim Your Energy: Coping with Cancer-Related Fatigue

Princess Margaret

## For patients who have cancer-related fatigue during or after cancer treatment

Cancer-related fatigue affects many patients with cancer. It is a feeling of tiredness that does not go away with rest or sleep.

This pamphlet will help you:

- Get a better understanding of your cancer-related fatigue
- Talk with your doctor about your fatigue
- Give you tips on how to improve and manage your fatigue



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## What is cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is a real symptom that affects the health and well-being of many cancer survivors. People may experience it while getting treatment for cancer or years after finishing treatment.

Cancer-related fatigue can be described as a feeling of tiredness that:

- is unusual and heavy
- does not go away with rest or sleep
- can get in the way of daily living

Cancer-related fatigue can have an impact on many parts of your life. It can:

- make everyday activities (housework or grocery shopping) more difficult
- change your mood and the way you feel about yourself
- affect your ability to work your regular hours
- prevent you from spending time with friends
- affect your relationships

## How can I manage cancer-related fatigue?

You may still be able to do all the things you used to do, but it may be more tiring than before your cancer treatment. There are many things that you can do to manage and cope with cancer-related fatigue. It involves making changes to the things you do everyday.

Below are tips to help you learn how to improve your fatigue and reclaim your energy.

Keep in mind that making these changes will take time.

- ✓ Talk to your doctor
- ✓ Talk to your family & friends
- ✓ Cope with new changes
- ✓ Use your energy wisely
- ✓ Eat a healthy diet
- ✓ Exercise regularly
- ✓ Manage your mental fatigue
- ✓ Get the right amount of sleep and rest
- ✓ Make small changes

## Talk to your doctor

Talking to your doctor is an important first step to help address or rule out some causes of your fatigue that may need medical care. This will also help keep your doctor informed about how you are doing.



The checklist on page 7 will help prepare you for your talk with your doctor. Completing the checklist will help you describe your cancer-related fatigue, how it has affected you, and what you are most concerned about.

Some health issues can cause or add to your fatigue, such as:

- Anemia (low blood count)
- Depression and anxiety
- Pain
- Side effects from your medication
- Electrolyte (sodium or potassium) imbalances
- Infection
- Thyroid dysfunction

Talk to your doctor if you think any of these issues are affecting you so you can get the care you need.

## Talk to your family and friends about your cancer-related fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue is a real health problem. Learning about it can help you teach others about your fatigue. Remember to share with your family and friends:



- how you are feeling
- what you have learned about improving your fatigue
- how they might be able to help you

## Cope with changes

Making changes to your everyday activities can be difficult, try to:

- Ask for help or support
- Accept help offered by others
- Allow yourself to care for yourself
- Learn to set limits based on your energy and needs
- Use coping techniques that have helped you in the past

## Use your energy wisely

When you have cancer-related fatigue, you may not have the same energy level to do what you usually would. You can still achieve your goals and do what is most important to you but it will involve using your energy wisely, saving your energy where you can, and pacing yourself.

- Plan your day. For example, if you cannot get everything done in one day, do the most important things first.
- Balance your activities between caring for yourself (grooming, bathing, eating), work (job, volunteering), and leisure (watching TV, going for walks).
- Think ahead. Prepare and organize what you will need before starting a task.
- Learn to say “no” to certain tasks.
- Learn to ask for help from others.
- Pace yourself. Break larger tasks into smaller parts.
- Switch between different tasks. Do one heavy task, and then one light task.
- Pay attention to your posture. Avoid straining.
- Sit rather than stand while working, if you can.
- Use aids like dustpans, scrubbers and dusters with long handles to reduce how much bending and reaching you do.

For more tips on using your energy wisely and how you can balance your daily activities, read the “**Use Your Energy Wisely**” pamphlet (see the resources section).

## Eat a healthy diet



Eating well can help you feel better. Try to:

- Include a variety of food in your meal like different fruits, vegetables, protein and dairy to make sure you get all the nutrients you need.
- Drink enough water. Try drinking 6 glasses of water every day.
- Spread your meals throughout the day.
- Aim for a healthy weight. This means paying attention to how much you eat.

Read the “**Canada’s Food Guide**” for more information (see the resources section).

## Exercise regularly

Moderate exercise that increases your heartbeat and breathing may be one of the best ways to improve fatigue. You can try to exercise at any time (during or after treatment).

**Always check with your doctor or nurse before starting a new exercise program.**

**There may be certain things you should or should not do.**

Here are a few things to consider:

- Make sure to warm up before exercising, and cool down afterwards.
- Aim for at least:
  - 150 minutes per week of moderate to high energy exercise.
  - 2 days per week of muscle and bone strengthening exercises.
- Start slowly and increase the time of each exercise session by 2 minutes every 1 to 2 weeks.
- Think of ways to be more active in your daily routine. For example, park a little further so you have to walk the rest of the way in.

## Manage your mental fatigue

Mental fatigue is any short-term problem that you might have with remembering, thinking or focusing. You may experience mental fatigue if you are under a lot of stress or dealing with very difficult mental tasks.

Give your mind some rest or “down time” by:

- doing activities that give you a feeling of being away from all of your worries
- trying new or old projects that are fun for you
- doing things that make you feel good
- spending time outdoors experiencing nature to improve your mental energy
- trying relaxation techniques

For more information on relaxation techniques, see the “**Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief**” pamphlet (see the resources section).

## Get the right amount of sleep and rest

- Talk to your doctor about problems that may disturb your sleep, like depression, anxiety and stress.
- Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.
- Make sure the room you sleep in is comfortable. For example, make sure the room is dark enough and not too cold.

Avoid:

- intense exercise 4 hours before bedtime.
- drinking too much fluid before going to sleep.
- coffee, nicotine and alcohol for at least 4 to 6 hours before bedtime
- watching TV in bed
- using sedatives like sleeping pills to help you fall asleep. If you do need them, do not use them as a permanent or long-term solution because many sedatives are addictive.

For more ways to improve your sleep, read the “**Helpful Hints for Better Sleep**” pamphlet (see the resources section).

## Take small steps, and make small changes

Remember that making these changes will take time.

- Listen to your body. Start slowly and progress gradually with practice.
- Set realistic or reasonable goals.
- Be patient with yourself. It can take a long time to see results from the changes you have made. Often, it is only when looking back that you can see how far you have come.
- Recognize and celebrate what you achieve along the way.

## Checklist to help you assess your fatigue with your doctor

Before talking to your doctor about your cancer-related fatigue, it is important to know how it is affecting your life. To help prepare you for the talk with your doctor, this section has a list of questions to help you think about how cancer-related fatigue is affecting you. Answer each question, and use the notes section at the end to write down your concerns or thoughts. Then, take this pamphlet with you when you see your doctor.



### #1: Do you have fatigue that is getting in the way of your ability to enjoy life?

**Check the boxes () next to the responses that apply to you.**

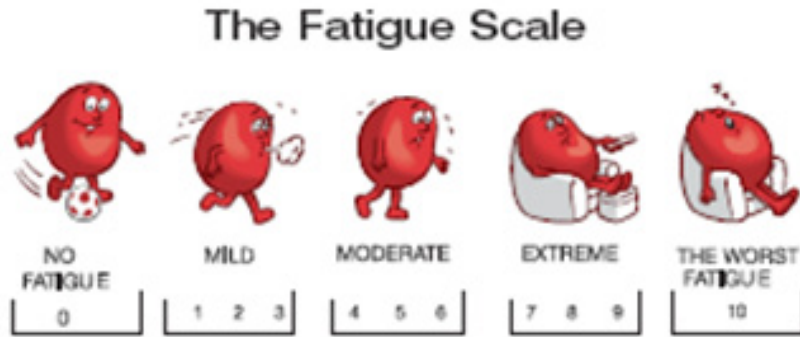
- I have less energy than in the past
- I get tired more quickly than usual
- I spend a lot of time resting or lying down
- I often feel tired even when I wake up
- Doing activities takes more effort than they used to
- I find it harder to focus (concentrate)
- Fatigue often affects my emotions and feelings
- I am concerned about my fatigue

**My fatigue often gets in the way of:**

- Doing activities I enjoy
- Completing my work duties
- Visiting or spending time with friends and family
- My family roles and responsibilities

## #2: How bad is your cancer-related fatigue?

Use this scale to help you decide how fatigued or tired you are on an average day. Share your fatigue rating with your doctor.



## #3: What fatigue symptoms are distressing or concerning you the most?

**Check the boxes () next to the changes or symptoms that are affecting you since your diagnosis.**

- Lack of energy
- Feeling like “I can’t be bothered to do much”
- Problems sleeping
- Finding it hard to get up in the morning
- Feeling anxious or depressed
- Pain in my muscles
- Being short of breath after doing small tasks
- Finding it hard to focus or concentrate
- Being unable to think clearly or make decision easily
- Loss of interest in doing things I usually enjoy
- Negative feelings about myself and others



#### #4: Is depression part of your fatigue?

**Check the boxes (☐) next to the changes or symptoms that are affecting you since your diagnosis.**

- I feel sad, anxious, irritable, nervous or guilty
- Sometimes I feel worthless or hopeless
- My usual sleeping pattern has changed (trouble sleeping or sleeping more than normal)
- My appetite has changed, and I am gaining or losing weight without trying
- I have lost interest in activities that I used to enjoy
- I feel restless or slow
- I have constant or recurring headaches, digestive problems or pain
- I have trouble focusing, remembering or making decisions
- I feel fatigued or tired
- I see a change in my work style or in how much I get done
- I have thoughts of suicide or death

**If you checked this last response, please contact your doctor right away for professional help and support.**

#### Notes

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## Resources for more information

### Pamphlets

- Use Your Energy Wisely
- Helpful Hints for Better Sleep
- Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief

To find these resources:

- Visit the Princess Margaret, Patient & Family Library (main floor)
- Go to [www.theprincessmargaret.ca](http://www.theprincessmargaret.ca)  
Click on “Patients & Families”, then click on “Patient & Family Library”  
to search for the resources.

### Classes at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

- Relaxation Therapy Group Sessions
- Reclaim Your Energy: Coping with Cancer-Related Fatigue



Attend this class in your language. You can book a medical interpreter for this class at no cost to you. To book, please call 416-581-8604. Five weekdays advance notice is needed.

For more information including times and location:

- Pick up the “Patient Education & Survivorship Calendar of Events” from the Princess Margaret, Patient & Family Library
- Go to [www.theprincessmargaret.ca](http://www.theprincessmargaret.ca) - Click on “see Calendar” under “Classes & Activities” and search for the classes

### Canada’s Food Guide

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/order-commander/index-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/order-commander/index-eng.php)

### Canada’s Physical Activity Guide

[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/04paap-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/04paap-eng.php)

### Cancer Related Fatigue Video

(Dr. Mike Evans and the Odette Cancer Centre Patient Family Education Team)

[youtu.be/YTFPMYGe86s](https://youtu.be/YTFPMYGe86s)