

**HOW TO MANGAGE**

# **CANCER-RELATED FATIGUE**



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# Overview

Fatigue is very common in people with cancer. Do something about it today!

Cancer-related fatigue is the most common symptom affecting people with cancer. You may experience fatigue before, during or after your cancer treatment. It is a feeling of constant tiredness despite sufficient rest and sleep, and usual daily activities become more difficult and effortful to perform than previously. It tends to affect your physical and mental function and social interactions. As a result, it affects your ability to enjoy life and perform usual activities and causes you to feel out of control over your health and well-being.

Many cancer survivors may mistakenly think that there is nothing much they can do about their fatigue. The good news is that you can manage your fatigue, which typically involves a combination of intervention strategies to be effective.



## Causes of Cancer-Related Fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue can be caused by cancer and/or its treatment side effects, though the cause is not fully understood. These causes may include:

- Existing fatigue before treatment
- The cancer itself
- Cancer treatments (chemotherapy, radiotherapy or drugs)
- Anemia (low red blood count)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Medications
- Pain
- Emotional distress
- Depression and/or anxiety
- Lack of exercise
- Sleep problems
- Nutrition problems
- Other medical conditions, e.g. infection, thyroid dysfunction

Some of these causes of cancer-related fatigue may be reversible. Our team will discuss with you and identify any medical condition(s) or causes which may contribute to your fatigue.

## Experiencing Cancer-Related Fatigue

Cancer-related fatigue may cause distress and affect your mood. For example you may feel irritable or depressed. It is usually more severe than the usual fatigue you may have experienced before you had cancer.

Examples of cancer-related fatigue include:

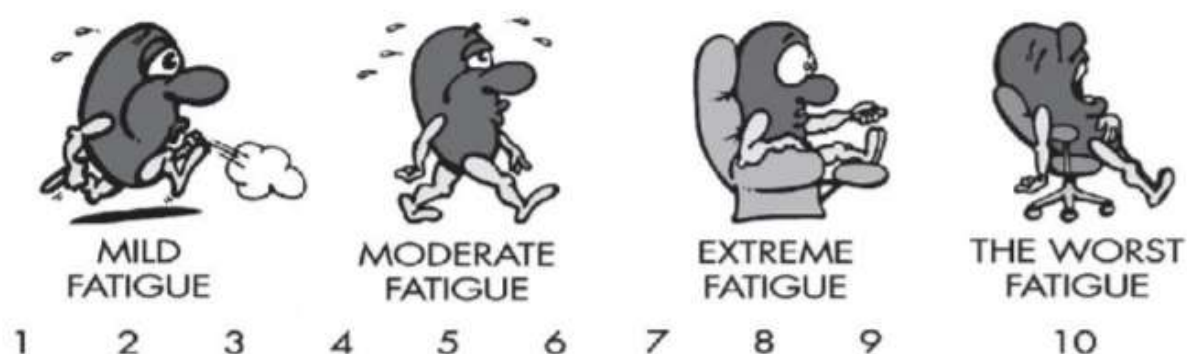
- Feeling effortful when performing activities like housework
- Experiencing muscle weakness and/or limb heaviness
- Difficulty concentrating eg finding it challenging to read a chapter of a book in one go
- Difficulty enduring regular hours at work
- Spending less time with family or friends
- Feeling tired despite resting
- Sleep changes such as sleeping much more, not being able to sleep, or needing to sleep in the day
- Losing interest in your usual activities

Your fatigue may fluctuate during the day and interfere with your day to day activities and what you would like to do.



## Tracking your Fatigue Level

Your experience of fatigue is personal. It can be rated on a scale from 0 = having no fatigue, 10 = experiencing the worst ever fatigue.



It can be useful to rate your fatigue level during activities to track your recovery. You may wish to obtain a sample of an activity log from your occupational therapist to track your fatigue level throughout the day.

If you have moderate to severe fatigue, you should speak to your therapist and learn strategies to manage the symptom.

## Visualising your Energy Level

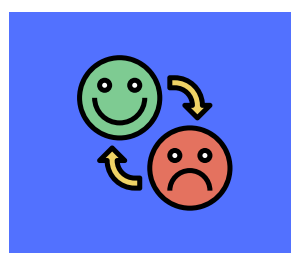
Fatigue is not limited to physical tiredness, having low energy level can also affect your mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. The energy we have can be categorised into 4 main areas:



**Physical**



**Mental/  
Cognition**



**Emotional**



**Spiritual**

Your energy level may have decreased after being diagnosed with cancer and going through your cancer treatment. It is important to use your energy wisely. By sticking to your limits rather than using too much, you may find that your energy level would be more consistent across the week and you may find that you are able to do more activities.

One way of thinking about your energy is to think of it as the money you have in your bank account. In this sense, you may need a longer time to recover when you 'overspend' your energy performing too many tasks. Remember, know your limit and spend within your limit.

## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

Be patient with yourself as making changes to your daily routine take time. Set small and realistic goals.

### 1) Talk to others

#### Family and Friends

Cancer-related fatigue may persist even after treatment has ended. Speak to your family and friends about your fatigue and ask for support if needed. For example, getting help for household chores and transport for hospital visits.



#### Employer and Colleagues

You may choose to tell your supervisor and/or colleagues about your fatigue. Everyone, no matter how independent and emotionally strong, can benefit from more support. Work adjustments such as getting help to handle heavy loads, work from home arrangement and flexible working hours may be helpful.



Everyone, no matter how emotionally strong they are, can benefit from more support. Depending on your preference, you may choose to confide in only a few people you know well.

If you have cancer-related fatigue, it can be difficult to resume work. This is especially so if your work requires you to:

- Work uneven days or shifts that change often
- Do physically demanding work (e.g. frequent lifting, bending)
- Standing or sitting with static posture for long hours.



## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 2) Make your activities easier

You may try to modify your activities to conserve energy:

- Consider eliminating unnecessary steps of a task and reduce physical effort, such as sitting on a chair to shower.
- Using equipment to conserve energy is always helpful. A vacuum robot can help clean the floor and a mini food processor can decrease the time and effort on food preparation.



### 3) Reserve the remaining 25% of your energy

The 75% rule is about always keeping 25% of your energy in reserve. You know that no matter how well you plan things there can always be the unexpected demand on your energy. Delegating some of the more physically or mentally draining tasks to your family members or friends may be helpful. On your part, accept help offered by others.

## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 4) Know your 4Ps

#### **Planning** your day

Plan your day with activity balanced by sufficient rest and alternate heavy with light task. You may want to plan and organise your items within reach before starting any activity.

#### **Prioritising** your activities

When your energy is draining, perform the tasks that are most important to you first. You may also prioritize tasks based on the effort required to complete them. Clearing tasks that require minimal time and effort may provide a sense of accomplishment to help propel you throughout the day.

#### **Pacing** yourself during activities

A steady pace is beneficial to prevent exhaustion. Spread out your activities such as housework and plan rest breaks throughout the day. Do one activity at a time, without rushing.

#### **Positioning** yourself well when doing activities

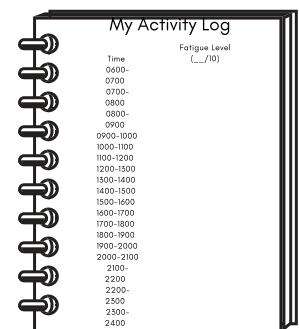
Avoid tasks that require long duration of standing, squatting or stooping. Avoid raising your arms too high above shoulder level or bending over for too long. Keep your back straight while performing a task. When carrying objects, keep them close to your body and spread the load between both arms. Sit down for activities if you need. It is helpful to re-organise your items at home so that they are within easy reach.

## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 5) Know your body

Recognise your baseline and avoid pushing beyond your limit. Your baseline is a comfortable level of activity that you can manage without experiencing a significant increase in your fatigue. Knowing your body will help you plan and complete tasks with more ease.

You may have more energy during certain time of the day. Perform your activity during those best timings. Keeping a diary of your activities throughout the day may be helpful to budget your energy for the day.



### Warning Signs



Pay attention to your body's warning signs and stop your activity if necessary.

These signs may include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Heaviness in limbs
- Taking longer than usual time to rest

**Inform your therapist immediately if you experience any of these symptoms:**

- Dizziness
- Falls
- Increased shortness of breath
- Heart beating quickly
- Anxiety or depression

## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 6) Be active

Engaging in regular exercises has been shown to be effective in improving fatigue. Some benefits may include improving endurance and strength, promoting better sleep, appetite and well-being

The following exercise guidelines has been show to improve cancer-related fatigue among cancer patients

#### **Aerobic Exercises\***

- 3 to 5 times per week
- Aim for total of 150 minutes per week

Moderate intensity aerobic training three times per week for a period of at least 12 weeks, e.g. walking, cycling, jogging, swimming, zumba.



#### **Resistance Training\***

- 2 times per week

Resistance training at least 2 non consecutive days per week, e.g. exercise using resistance bands, or using weights.

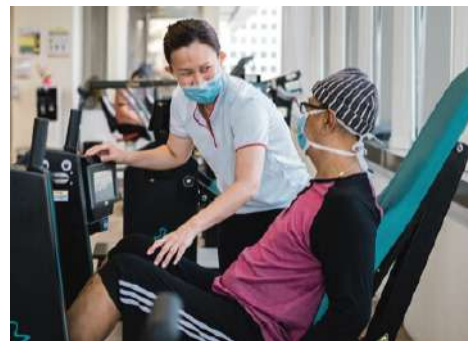
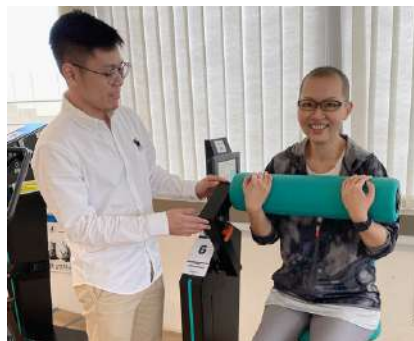


## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 6) Be active

**\*Note:** Exercise intensity and duration vary among individuals. Start at your own pace with a low intensity and slowly progress if you are not used to exercising.

Your Exercise Physiologist or Physiotherapist will supervise and advise you on how to perform your exercises safely by progressively increasing the intensity and duration of your exercise.



Your exercise will be modified if you have:

- Been sedentary for a long time
- Existing cardiovascular or respiratory condition(s)
- Bone metastases
- A low blood count
- A major surgery recently
- Stiffness, pain and/or decreased range of motion

## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 7) Healthy diet

It is important to have adequate and appropriate nutrients throughout the day as it improves your energy and reduces your fatigue. Your dietitian will be able to provide you with more information tailored to your needs.



### 8) Rest and relaxation

Rest and relaxation can be used in a restorative way once we are tired, or in a preventative way to prevent the fatigue we experience from worsening.

Planning time in your day to relax is important to ensure that you have adequate rest, otherwise something else may take precedence causing you to have no time to rest. Some helpful strategies include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery. Speak to your therapist or social worker to learn more about these strategies.

#### Deep Breathing

- Sit comfortably. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your abdomen.
- Breathe in through your nose. Your shoulder and upper chest should not move up. You should feel your abdomen expand under your hand as you breathe in.
- Breathe in counting to 4 and allow your abdomen to expand fully.
- Breathe out in a relaxed manner counting to 8; you may breathe out through your mouth with a pursed lip if it is too difficult to slow down your breath.



## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 9) Mindfulness



"Mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, to things as they are."

As we grow older, we become less aware and more likely to live life in an 'automatic pilot' mode, e.g. influenced by your habits and beliefs. Practicing mindfulness can help direct your attention away from stressful thoughts that can be draining and bring our focus back on the 'right here, right now'.

Mindfulness involves taking the time to pay attention to where we are and what is going on without judgements, and that starts with us becoming more aware of our body, thoughts, and emotions. Practising being more "grounded" and more aware of your physical sensations can help you to be more present in the here and now.

Choose a routine activity in your daily life and make a deliberate effort to bring moment-to-moment awareness to that activity. For example, pick up a fruit, hold it in your hand, and observe for five minutes. Notice its colors, shape, texture, and smell. Alternatively, listen for sounds that are near such as your breath and then listen for sounds that are farther away like the someone talking in the corridor and the noise of traffic.

## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 9) Cognitive behavioural therapy

This ABC exercise can be used any time anywhere either by writing it down, or doing it mentally.

<b>A=</b> <b>Activating Event</b>	The situation that led to the unpleasant emotion and/ or physical bodily sensations.	Example: I want to go out for exercise but I feel tired.
<b>B =</b> <b>Beliefs</b>	My beliefs, automatic thoughts and mental images.	I'm still unwell.
<b>C =</b> <b>Consequence</b>	My emotion or response	Discouraged, lie in bed.

Examine your automatic thoughts and re-assess your assumptions. Some questions you may ask yourself includes:

- What is the evidence that the automatic thought is true or not true?
- Is there an alternative explanation?
- What's the worse that could happen? What's the best that could happen? What's the most realistic outcome?
- What's the effect of believing the automatic thought? What could be the effect of changing my thinking or belief?
- What should I do about it?
- If my friend was in the situation and had this thought, what would I tell him/ her?





## 9) Cognitiv behavioural therapy

Here is an chart of everyday activities you can practice mindfulness on. We call it the "**Mindfulness Bingo**"

<b>Do something creative</b>	<b>Breathe deeply</b>	<b>Eat deliberately</b>	<b>Speak honestly</b>	<b>Look softly</b>
<b>Relate kindly</b>	<b>Listen wholeheartedly</b>	<b>Set a daily intention</b>	<b>Love fully</b>	<b>Live purposefully</b>
<b>Walk slowly</b>	<b>Listen to music</b>	<b>Eat mindfully</b>	<b>Write down your thoughts</b>	<b>Take a break from technology</b>
<b>Show appreciation</b>	<b>Take time each day to reflect</b>	<b>Pause between action</b>	<b>Wake up early</b>	<b>Connect with your senses</b>
<b>Be in the moment</b>	<b>Think freely</b>	<b>Notice your thoughts</b>	<b>Declutter one space</b>	<b>Get a good night's sleep</b>

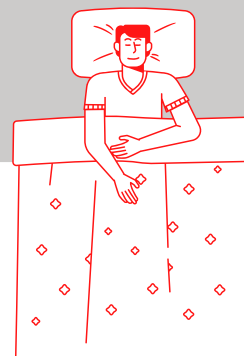
## Strategies to Manage Cancer-Related Fatigue

### 10) Having a good night's sleep

Not getting the right amount of sleep will certainly affect your energy. It is important to develop and practice healthy sleep habits to improve your ability to fall asleep and remain asleep through the night. A sleep diary may be useful to track the quality of your sleep.

Look through this list to see if you have been practising good sleep habits:

- Taking a nap helps to reduce fatigue. Limit nap to early afternoon and avoid frequent naps.
- Avoid caffeine and a heavy meal before bedtime.
- Writing down worrying thoughts instead of thinking about them.
- Have a wind down period, e.g. listening to relaxing music before sleeping.
- Using the bedroom for sleep and restrict in-bed activities, e.g. unplug from electronics.
- Ensure your bedroom is quiet, dark and at a cool and comfortable temperature.
- Maintain regular sleeping timing.



**NOTES**





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