

## Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

## 7. Fatigue, exhaustion or tiredness

Feeling tired is the most common symptom among people with cancer, affecting over 70% of patients. It can be overwhelming, distressing and cause massive disruption to a person's normal life. If you feel tired most of the time the term fatigue is generally used. It can affect your sense of well-being and how well you can carry out your daily activities. It can also affect your relationships with family and friends. As cancer treatments have become more intense and more demanding, fatigue has become more severe. Both chemotherapy and radiotherapy are known to cause long-term fatigue. Fatigue is also associated with emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and simply the cumulative emotional distress of having cancer.

People with cancer often describe their fatigue as: unusual, excessive, a whole body experience, unrelated to how much or little they do, not helped by rest or sleep, and hard to explain. It may be helpful to realise that there are two types of fatigue, **physical fatigue** (e.g. muscle weakness and lack of stamina) and **mental fatigue** (reduced alertness, feeling easily overwhelmed, vulnerable to distraction). It usually gets better after treatment finishes but, for some people, it can continue for months or even years.



Tell your doctor/nurse about your fatigue as they may be able to help. For example, treating the possible causes of fatigue, such as anaemia or sleeplessness, can help. There are also things you can do for yourself that may help you to cope.

### How can I manage my fatigue?

- It is normal and common to feel exhausted when coping with cancer and the treatment schedule.
- It may take time to learn how to manage your fatigue and work out what best suits you.

Exercise has been shown through research to be helpful in reducing and preventing fatigue. In fact, physical

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inactivity among cancer patients may be a significant cause of fatigue. Try to include a little gentle exercise into your daily routine, even if it feels a bit of an effort. Even a short walk once a day may help – *start small and build up slowly*. If this would be difficult for you, ask for advice about devising an exercise plan suitable for you.

- Plan, Prioritise and Pace—when you have the most energy move the task to the time when you are feeling better. Make choices about what you want to do and put things in order of necessity and **PACE** yourself—**STOP** when you are tired.
- Ensure that you are not stuck in a boom-and-bust cycle, doing too much one day and unable to do anything the next. By planning your day realistically it is possible to conserve energy, e.g. by postponing non-essential tasks, delegating high-energy tasks and scheduling important activities for times of high energy, and only doing as much as you have set out to achieve.
- Consider your sleep/wake pattern. Having a routine where you go to bed and wake up at a certain time can help ensure a good sleep pattern and prevent fatigue symptoms. Try to avoid taking a nap during the day, unless necessary so as not to disturb the sleep/wake cycle. **See the Sleep Problems Information Sheet**
- Your level of nutrition and hydration will influence your fatigue, so ensure that you have a healthy diet and you drink plenty of fluids throughout the day (2 litres per day). If you have difficulty taking in food as a result of nausea and vomiting you may simply lack energy resources. If you would like additional help with nutrition speak to a dietician.
- Try using a 'Fatigue Diary'. This can be helpful in identifying patterns or triggers for the fatigue that will go some way to helping you to manage your fatigue. For example, if it becomes clear from keeping a diary for a week that you tend to be very active in the morning and then feel exhausted for the rest of the day, pacing and setting smaller more realistic goals would be important.
- Friends and relatives can easily underestimate the effects of fatigue. However, they may be able to give you more practical and emotional support if they understand how debilitating it can be.
- If you have not recently had a blood test to identify possible causes of fatigue, then consider asking your doctor to test you for anaemia and hypothyroidism.
- Stress management techniques such as relaxation training can help prevent 'leakage' of valuable limited energy. In other words, rather than expending energy on worrying or feeling tense, you can preserve it for more useful activities.
- If you are in constant pain this can contribute to fatigue. It may be useful to discuss methods of pain control with your doctor.
- Consider the effect of prolonged fatigue on your overall mood.—**See Sadness/Depression Information Sheet**

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# 7. Fatigue, exhaustion or tiredness - Resources/Information

## Local Resources:

<p><b>Massage therapy, reflexology, Reiki and Yoga</b></p> <p>Please contact the Fern Centre for further details 01271 311855</p>	<p>The Fern Centre at the NDDH provides a selection of complementary therapies and is a FREE service to our cancer patients. There is also a list of local accredited therapists and practitioners in the local area available to patients. It is for information only— please note we are not recommending or promoting any particular individual or website.</p>
<p>GP Practice</p>	

## National Resources:

<p><b>NHS UK/NHS Choices</b> <a href="http://www.nhs.uk">www.nhs.uk</a> <a href="https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/self-help-tips-to-fight-fatigue/">https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/self-help-tips-to-fight-fatigue/</a></p>	<p>This website is jam-packed full of ways to improve your health and well-being including tips on how to combat fatigue and general tiredness.</p>
<p><b>British Holistic Medical Association</b> <a href="http://www.bhma.org">www.bhma.org</a></p>	<p>The BHMA website is growing treasure trove for anyone wanting more understanding of the balance of the human and the technical in healthcare.</p>
<p><b>Macmillan Cancer Support Line</b> <a href="http://www.macmillan.org.uk">www.macmillan.org.uk</a> Call 0808 808 00 00 — Monday – Friday 9am—8pm</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on <b>+44 207 091 2230</b></p>
<p><a href="#">Macmillan on-line Community</a></p>	<p>Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!</p>
<p><b>Marie Curie Support Line</b> — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support <a href="http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support">www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support</a></p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday</p>

## Other Resources :

<p><b>Macmillan Booklets:</b></p>	<p>Coping with Fatigue— <b>MAC11664</b></p>
	<p>How are you feeling? The emotional effects of cancer <b>MAC11593</b></p>
	<p>Cancer, you and your partner— <b>MAC12157</b></p>