Cancer related fatigue: What can you do about it?

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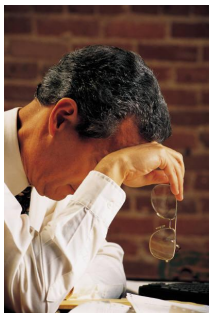

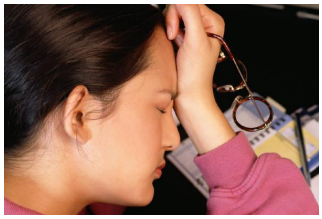

Did you know?

- That fatigue is common with a diagnosis of cancer
- There are many causes of cancer related fatigue and many ways to reduce it

What is cancer related fatigue?

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 interfere with activities of daily living

If you have any of the feelings above, some of the information below might help you.

What can I do about it?

There are several things that you can do that may help to reduce your cancer related fatigue. It is important to know that making changes to activities and behaviours that can help reduce your fatigue, might take time. These are some suggested ways to help you to reduce your fatigue.

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Talk to your doctor

Tell your doctor about the ways in which you feel your fatigue is affecting your life.

- Give your fatigue a number between 0 and 10 (0=no fatigue and 10=the worst fatigue you can imagine)

Tell your doctor the symptoms that are affecting you the most (check the ones that affect you the most):

- ❑ Poor sleeping
- ❑ Lack of energy
- ❑ Difficulty concentrating
- ❑ Difficulty making decisions
- ❑ Negative feelings about yourself and others
- ❑ Feeling short of breath
- ❑ Pain in your muscles

For more information about this, you can read the "Talking to Your Doctor About Fatigue" pamphlet that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

2. Communicate with your family and friends about cancer related fatigue

Tell them:

- How **you** are feeling
- What you have learned about improving your fatigue
- How they might be able to help you

3. Eat a healthy diet

- Eat a diet that has lots of variety to make sure you get all the nutrients you need
- Work towards a healthy weight. This means paying attention to how much you eat. Use "Canada's Food Guide" for help
- Spread your meals throughout the day
- Keep hydrated (try drinking 6 glasses of water every day)
- Reduce caffeine (less is best, try to keep to a maximum of 4-cups per day)

- Include more healthy fats and fewer saturated fats (use olive & canola oils rather than butter, eat fatty fish like salmon, herring, mackerel and sardines)

For more information about this, you can read "Canada's Food Guide" that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

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4. Exercise

Studies show that exercise that increases your heart and breathing rates is one of the best ways to combat fatigue.

- At any time in your cancer journey (during or after treatment) appropriate physical activity and exercise can improve your ability to function and decrease your fatigue
- Make sure to warm up before exercising and cool down afterward
- Try to exercise for 20-30 minutes, 3-5 days each week
- Increase your amount of exercise by 2-3 minutes every 1-2 weeks
- Think of ways to increase your physical activity as part of your daily routine (use stairs instead of escalators)
- Always check with your doctor or nurse before starting a new exercise program in case there are specific things you should or should not do.

For more information about this, you can read the "Talking to Your Doctor About Fatigue" pamphlet that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

5. Save your energy

- Plan your day and balance your activities between self-care, work and leisure
- Organize materials you need before starting a task
- If you won't be able get everything done in one day, do the most important things first
- Learn to say "no"
- Learn to ask for help
- Pace yourself by breaking a larger task into smaller parts. Do one heavy task, and then one light task
- Pay attention to your posture
- Sit, rather than stand to work
- Use aids like long handled dustpans, scrubbing and dusting aids to minimize bending and reaching

For more information about this, you can read the "Talking to Your Doctor About Fatigue" pamphlet that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

6. Cope with mental fatigue

Allow your mind some "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
- Making sure you have time to do things that make you feel good

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For more information about this, you can read the "Talking to Your Doctor About Fatigue" pamphlet that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

7. Try relaxation techniques

- Take deep breaths
- Do progressive muscle relaxation (such as tensing each muscle group in your body then relaxing all at once.)
- Use guided imagery/visualization (such as imagining yourself walking along the beach or a forest path, or relaxing in a garden)
- Remind yourself that it is good to take time to relax

For more information about this, you can read the "Relaxation Techniques" pamphlet that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

8. Get the right amount of sleep and rest

- Treat problems that disturb sleep (depression, anxiety and stress)
- Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day
- Ensure your environment is comfortable for you when you go to bed
- Avoid/limit coffee, nicotine and alcohol for 3-4 hours before bed
- Avoid watching TV in bed. Block out light and sound as much as possible
- Limit use of sedatives. If you need sleeping pills temporarily, understand that they are not a permanent fix as many sedatives can be addicting
- Exercise regularly
- Avoid excessive fluids before going to sleep

For more information about this, you can read the "Talking to Your Doctor About Fatigue" pamphlet that is available in the Princess Margaret Hospital Patient & Family Library located on the main floor.

9. Go Slowly

- Make small changes at first, and take your time
- You may want to get back to where you were quickly but, unfortunately, our bodies do not work that way. Set realistic expectations
- It can take a long time to see results from the changes you have made—it is often only in looking back that you can see how far you have come
- It is alright to expect that you will be able to do all the things you have always done but it may be more tiring than you remember
- It's all about baby steps—baby steps can still get you where you want to go

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Recommended resources:

Each of these pamphlets is available in the Patient & Family Library, located in the lobby of Princess Margaret Hospital or can be found online at:
http://uhn/education/patient%5Fed/titles/a.asp

- Cancer Related Fatigue: Are You Tired From It?
- Canada's Food Guide
- Canada's Physical Activity Guide
- Feeling Zapped?
- How Do You Spend Your Day?
- Coping with Mental Fatigue
- Relaxation Techniques
- Talking to Your Doctor about Your Fatigue

Canada's Food Guide and Guide to Physical Activity can be found online at:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/order-commander/index-eng.php

Visit the weekly drop-in Relaxation Therapy Group to practice relaxation techniques. These sessions run every Wednesday from 1:00- 1:45pm in the Pencer Centre (18th Floor Princess Margaret Hospital). No registration required.

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