

# Talking to your doctor about Cancer Related Fatigue (CRF)



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Doctors and patients do not often discuss cancer related fatigue or ways to improve it. There are many possible reasons for this.

Your Doctor may not:

- Recognize and address energy “leaks” that are easy to fix.
- Know about the most recent concepts in fatigue management.



You may not:

- See fatigue as a real symptom or problem.
- Want to ask for or accept help.
- Ask for help because you think asking is a sign of weakness or loss of control.
- Know what to do.

In order to talk to your doctor about fatigue, it is important to know the ways it is affecting your life. To help you, read the “Your Bank to Energy Savings: Helping people with cancer handle fatigue”. This is available in the Patient Family Library, or on the Internet at [www.cshodgson.com/YourEnergyBank.pdf](http://www.cshodgson.com/YourEnergyBank.pdf). Some of the tools in that pamphlet are included here.

**Before you see your doctor** answer these questions to help you understand:

- If and how your fatigue is getting in the way of enjoying your life
- Your level of fatigue
- The fatigue symptoms that are distressing you
- Whether depression could be playing a part in your fatigue

You can use your answers to these questions to talk to your doctor about YOUR Cancer Related Fatigue.

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

Complete the checklist. For each question, check ( ) the response that best represents your situation.

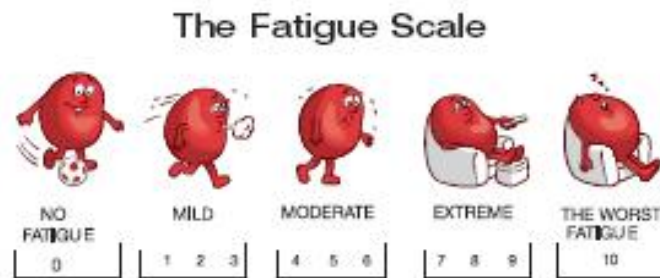
- Do you have less energy than in the past?
- Do you tire more quickly than usual?
- Do you spend a lot of your time resting or lying down?
- Do you frequently feel tired even when you wake up?

Does your fatigue frequently interfere with:

- Doing activities you enjoy?
- Carrying out duties and responsibilities?
- Your ability to visit or socialize?
- Family roles and responsibilities?
- Do activities take more effort than they used to?
- Do you find it harder to concentrate?
- Does fatigue frequently interfere with your emotions and feelings?
- Are you concerned about your fatigue?

## How Bad is Your Cancer Related Fatigue?

Use this scale to help you decide how fatigued (tired) you are.



## What Fatigue Symptoms Are Distressing You the Most?

Review the symptoms below and see which ones are affecting you and which ones are a **change from how you felt before your cancer 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 muscles
- Being short of breath after doing small tasks
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Being unable to think clearly or make decision easily
- Loss of interest in doing things you usually enjoy
- Negative feelings about yourself and others

### **Is Depression Part of your Fatigue?**

Look at the list below so you can tell your doctor which of any symptoms in the depression checklist you are feeling **that are a change from how you felt before your cancer diagnosis.**

#### **Depression Checklist**

- Feeling sad, anxious, irritable, nervous and/or guilty
- Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- Changes in your usual sleep patterns (either having trouble sleeping or sleeping more than normal)
- Changes in your appetite; gaining or losing weight without trying
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Restless or slowed behaviour
- Persistent or recurring headaches, digestive disorders, or chronic pain
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Fatigue, loss of energy
- Change in work style or productivity
- Thoughts of suicide or death—**if yes, seek immediate professional help.**

### **What should I do if I do have fatigue?**

#### **If you are still on active treatment:**

- Remember active treatment (chemotherapy and/or radiation) can cause fatigue.
- Review “Finding Your Strength during chemotherapy treatment” and Your Bank to Energy Savings “ booklets to see if there are some tips you could incorporate into your life.



See also:

1. PMH Pamphlets on
  - Cancer Related Fatigue: Are you Tired From It?
  - Managing Your Cancer Related Fatigue
  - “Feeling Zapped?” Learn to Use your Energy wisely
  - Relaxation techniques
  - Mental Fatigue and what you can do about it
  - How Do You Spend Your Day?
2. Health Canada Exercise guidelines booklet
3. Heart and Stroke foundation “Coping with Stress” booklet

**If you have completed treatment and your fatigue does not seem to be improving** you may want to talk to your doctor.

### **Let your doctor know how you feel**

Only your doctor can deal with some causes of fatigue

- Special tests may be needed to decide what is happening in your body
- Based on the results of the tests, referrals can be made to other health care professionals or prescriptions for medications may be needed

Some examples are:

- Low blood count (anemia)
- Electrolyte Imbalances (e.g. sodium, potassium)
- Infection

Talk to your doctor about the medications you are taking. You may be on medications that make it difficult for you to sleep if you take them at night, or medications that make you tired during that day that could be taken at night.

If part of your fatigue is caused by pain that is interfering with your sleep, you may wish to discuss pain medications.

If anxiety and depression are contributing to your fatigue you may want to see someone to talk about what is troubling you. There may be medications that can help. Think about the possibility that you are experiencing some depression that may contribute to you fatigue. “Some studies suggest that up to 25% of cancer patients experience depression or anxiety. Being depressed can rob you of your energy.”

**Remember:**

1. Use the tools in this pamphlet to help you think and talk about how you are feeling about your cancer related fatigue **before** going to your doctor so you can give him/her this information.
2. Review resources available in the Patient and Family Library

When you talk to your doctor about how you feel, use the specific information you have learned from completing the exercises in this pamphlet.

- How is cancer related fatigue affecting your life?
- How bad is your cancer related fatigue (give it a number)?
- Which fatigue symptoms are distressing you most?
- Are you feeling some symptoms of depression?  
If yes, which ones?

Write the answers to these questions on the back page of this pamphlet and take it with you when you go to see your doctor.

**Notes**

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