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# How to Manage Your Fatigue



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people who have fatigue before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients and the patient's family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.



Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca)  
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# What is cancer-related fatigue?

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Cancer-related fatigue is a feeling of tiredness that can last a long time and does not go away with rest or sleep. It is different than fatigue you felt before you had cancer.

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Fatigue is usually worse during treatment.

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Your fatigue can range from mild to severe and may come and go over time.

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Fatigue is the most common symptom felt by people with cancer. It is a normal part of your cancer treatment.

## **Fatigue can make you feel:**

- very tired, weak, heavy or slow
- worn out
- like you can't think or remember things
- like you don't have the energy to see people or do activities

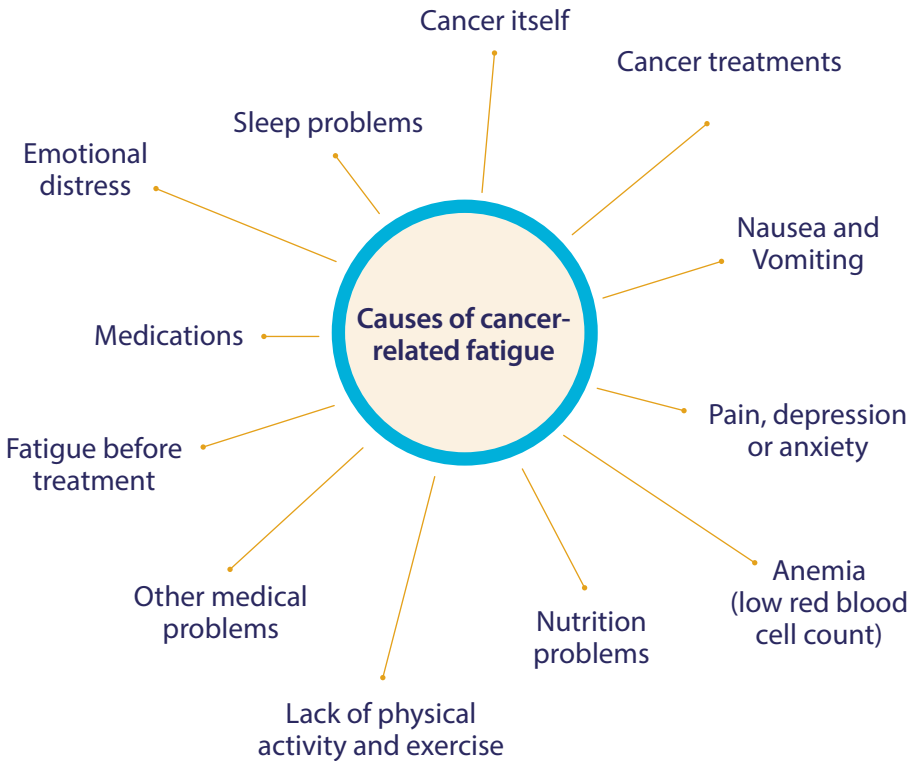
## **Patient story:**

"I knew in my head I should get moving and do more, but my body just didn't want to go!"

# What causes cancer-related fatigue?

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**This picture shows things that can cause cancer-related fatigue:**



# What can I do to manage my fatigue?

## Be Active

Exercise is a great way to improve your energy and make your fatigue better.



### Aim to get 30 minutes of moderate exercise on most days.

The exercise should not be too easy or too hard. You should be able to talk easily while you are exercising.

### These tips can help you be more active:

Choose a fun activity that suits your health and fitness level.

Start slowly. Begin with light exercise like walking, swimming or yoga.

Go at your own pace. Slowly increase the amount and difficulty of exercise.

Choose a mix of aerobic activities (like walking or cycling) and strength training (like lifting weights).

If 30 minutes of activity is too hard, split it up into shorter 5 to 10 minute sessions.

### Exercise can also:

- help your appetite
- help you get better sleep
- build stronger muscles
- give you a feeling of well-being

### For help with exercise, ask your health care team to refer you to:

- a physiotherapist
- an occupational therapist
- an exercise specialist
- a rehabilitation specialist

### Be safe!

- ✓ Stop and rest if you feel sore, stiff or out of breath.
- ✓ Always talk to your health care team about how to exercise safely.
- ✓ You can exercise at any time during or after treatment.

## Improve your sleep

Getting good sleep can give you more energy.



### These tips can help you improve your sleep:

#### Morning

Wake up at the same time each day, even on the weekends.

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Open the curtains to let in light or go to a bright room after you wake up.

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#### Daytime

Rest in a room other than your bedroom.

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Take short naps (less than 1 hour) between 12 and 3 pm.

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Limit alcohol and caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate) in the afternoon and evening.

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#### Evening

Set a “clear-your-head time” for planning and worrying in the early evening. This will help you deal with concerns that come up later, when you are trying to fall asleep.

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Before going to bed, lower the lights and do activities like reading, listening to music or taking a warm bath. Try activities like prayer, mediation, and imagery.

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Turn off all screens like computers, TV’s and iPads at least one hour before going to bed.

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#### Bedtime

Use your bed for sleep and intimacy/sex only.

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If you can’t fall asleep after 20 to 30 minutes, get out of bed until you feel sleepy and then go back to bed.

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Only go to bed when you feel sleepy, regardless of what time it is.

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**Talk to your doctor** about problems that may disturb your sleep, like depression, anxiety and stress.

## Manage stress and emotions

Talking to someone about your feelings and doing activities to help with stress and anxiety can help your fatigue.



### These tips can help you manage your stress and emotions:

Change or stay away from situations that cause you stress.

Distract yourself by playing games or talking with friends.

Focus on positive things and things you can control.

#### **Patient story:**

“At first I didn’t think there was anything I could do for my fatigue so I didn’t mention it to my oncologist. I’m glad to know there are some things I can try to help me cope with feeling so tired.”

**To talk to someone about your feelings, ask your health care team to refer you to a:**

- social worker
- counsellor
- psychosocial oncology nurse
- psychologist
- psychiatrist
- occupational therapist
- spiritual care provider

**Try these relaxing activities to help you reduce your stress:**

Yoga

Acupuncture

Energy healing therapies, like  
Healing Touch, Reiki and Qigong

Hypnosis

Massage

Music therapy

Deep breathing and relaxation  
exercises

Guided imagery — imagining  
yourself in a pleasant, calm place

Meditation or clearing your mind

Reflexology — a special massage  
for your hands and feet

Quiet activities you enjoy, such  
as reading or listening to music

**Talk to your doctor before  
taking any herbal therapies.**

Some herbal therapies,  
like Ginseng, should not be  
taken when you are having  
cancer treatments.

For more information see the Canadian Cancer Society's  
guide to Complementary Therapies. Go to  
[www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)



## Find support

You don't have to cope with your fatigue alone. You can find support in your community and through your healthcare team.



### These tips can help you find support:

Talk to someone you trust about how your fatigue makes you feel.

Join a support group. There are cancer support groups online, or your health care team can help you find one in your community.

Support your spiritual needs through nature, religion or activities that bring you peace of mind, like writing in a journal.

To learn more about online support groups, check out Canadian Cancer Society's Peer Support Service. Go to [www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### Support for returning to work

Some companies have programs that can help you return to work by letting you:

- ✓ work part-time to ease you back into the job
- ✓ change your work times so you do not have to commute during rush hour
- ✓ reduce your work responsibilities
- ✓ make changes to how you work, where you work or the type of work you do

For more information, see the pamphlet "Prepare to return to work after cancer" on page 14 of this guide.



## Pace yourself

Use your energy wisely in order to be able to do the things that are most important to you.



### Plan ahead

Plan your day with time to rest before and after activities.

Spread out tasks like housework over a longer period of time.

Ask family or friends to help you with things like housework, shopping, and child or pet care.

Arrange your home so that most activities can be done on one floor.

Keep things you need often within easy reach.

Plan activities or outings where you can sit down to rest.

### Prioritize

Decide which activities are most important to you and save your energy for those.

Put off less important activities.

### Pace

Do one activity at a time, without rushing.

Stop and rest before you get tired, even in the middle of a task.

Rest between activities.

### Position

Sit when you do things, if possible.

Use walking aids, such as handrails, grab bars, a cane or walker.

Avoid heavy lifting.

**Keep track of your fatigue in a journal or diary.** You may notice that you have more energy at certain times of the day.

## Eat well

Eat healthy foods and lots of variety to have more energy.



### These tips can help you eat well when you have fatigue:

Cook when you have the most energy.

Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day.

When you have energy, make extra food to keep in the freezer.

Buy healthy but convenient food (like pre-cut fruit and vegetables).

**Follow a balanced diet\*** with a variety of foods from the four food groups:

- Vegetables and fruit
- Grain products
- Milk and alternatives
- Meat and alternatives

\*Unless you were told by a health care team member to eat a specific diet or avoid specific foods.

For more food tips see the Canadian Cancer Society's 'Eating well when you have cancer' booklet. Go to [www.cancer.ca/publications](http://www.cancer.ca/publications)

### Ask your health care team to refer you to a registered dietitian.

A dietitian can help you find ways to eat well when you are fatigued. You can also visit [EatRightOntario.ca](http://EatRightOntario.ca) or call **1-877-510-5102** to connect with a registered dietitian for free.

## Be patient. Feeling better will take time.

Small changes can improve your fatigue over time.



### These tips can help you make changes:

Listen to your body.

Start slowly and make changes one at a time.

Set easy, realistic goals.

Recognize and celebrate what you achieve along the way.

Sometimes even after trying all of these tips you may still feel fatigue. Be gentle and kind to yourself during this difficult time.

## If you have severe fatigue

It is important to talk to your health care team if you think you have severe fatigue.

They can identify possible causes of your fatigue, do additional tests and offer you available resources.

Use energy-savers, like wheelchairs, walkers, “reachers” for grabbing things and rolling carts for moving things.

Medications like methylphenidate, modafinil or dexamethasone are sometimes given to help people with severe fatigue, but there is no actual evidence that they really work. Speak to your health care providers to learn more.

# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## **Tell your health care team right away if you have these symptoms:**

Dizziness, loss of balance or falls

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Fatigue that is suddenly much worse

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Sudden shortness of breath or a fast heart-beat

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Unexplained bleeding or bleeding that does not stop

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Anxiety, depression or feelings of not coping well

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## **What is symptom screening?**

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your symptom.



0 is no fatigue and 10 is the worst possible fatigue.

**1-3**

You may have **Mild** fatigue if:

You have some symptoms of fatigue

You are able to do regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning or working

**4-6**

You may have **Moderate** fatigue if:

Your fatigue causes you moderate stress and worry

You have trouble doing regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning or working

You have trouble walking or climbing stairs

**7-10**

You may have **Severe** fatigue if:

Your fatigue is strong and causes you high levels of stress and worry

You want to sit, lie down or sleep all day

You are not able to do regular activities like caring for yourself, cooking, cleaning, or working

When resting you may feel sudden fatigue and/or shortness of breath, rapid heart rate and/or have low blood count

Your health care team wants to know about your fatigue. Your concerns and questions are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources, go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites

### **Cancer Care Ontario**

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

### **Manage Cancer Fatigue**

[health.sunnybrook.ca/  
cancer-fatigue/](http://health.sunnybrook.ca/cancer-fatigue/)

## Support Services

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

### **Community Services Locator**

[www.cancer.ca/csl](http://www.cancer.ca/csl)

### **Cancer Chat Canada**

[www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca)

## Video

### **Cancer Related Fatigue — by Dr. Mike Evans**

## Booklets

### **Reclaim your energy: Coping with cancer-related fatigue —**

University Health Network

### **Prepare to return to work after cancer —**

University Health Network

[www.uhn.on.ca](http://www.uhn.on.ca) and search for the  
booklet title

### **Call the Canadian Cancer Society**

to be mailed a copy of the two  
booklets below

1-888-939-3333

### **Complementary therapies:**

### **A guide for people with cancer**

### **Eating well when you have cancer**

**Ask your health care team for more information about managing your fatigue.**

Self-management classes:

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Local support groups:

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Videos:

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Books:

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Pamphlets:

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**Ask your health care team who to contact if you feel that your symptoms are so bad that you need help right away.**

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This patient guide was adapted from Cancer Care Ontario’s “How to Manage Your Fatigue” booklet. The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Reclaim your energy:  
Coping with cancer related fatigue  
(Princess Margaret Cancer Centre)
- Managing cancer related fatigue:  
For people affected by cancer”  
(Canadian Partnership Against Cancer)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about fatigue. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing fatigue. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

**Need this information in an accessible format?**

1-855-460-2647 | TTY 416-217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

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