Dealing with Fatigue

Fatigue, usually described as a feeling of tiredness or exhaustion that doesn’t go away with rest, is one of the most common and frustrating symptoms in serious illness. However, the exact causes and how best to manage it aren’t always clear. Find out what home health care professionals know about fatigue and what you can do about it.

Causes of fatigue:

- **Your illness.** For instance, cancer cells grow more quickly than normal cells, so they use up more of your body’s energy resources. Your body gets that energy by breaking down muscle cells, so you feel weaker and more tired.
- **Medical treatment.** Chemotherapy and radiation damage both healthy cells as well as cancer cells, and your body needs to work harder to repair the damage.
- **Loss of blood or oxygen.** Blood loss from surgery, disease, and reduced red blood cells from chemotherapy can cause fatigue. Your body needs blood cells to carry oxygen and turn nutrients from food into energy. Lung disease (e.g. COPD) or heart disease can also interfere with oxygen.
- **Medications.** Some medications, such as pain or nausea relievers, can cause fatigue.
- **Infection.** Your body uses extra energy to get rid of an infection.

- **Unrelieved pain, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.** All of these can keep you awake at night and also use up your body’s energy stores.
- **Poor nutrition.** It is important to try to eat enough protein, carbohydrates and fats to provide the “fuel” for your body to function properly.
- **Dehydration.** If you are not drinking or are losing fluid through vomiting or diarrhea, your body won’t have the balance of water and nutrients it needs.
- **Depression or anxiety.** Emotions related to coping with your diagnosis or illness, including worry over how your family will manage, may lead to fatigue.
- **Lack of sleep.** You may be trying to do too much and your body is telling you to slow down. You need rest to deal with the increased physical and emotional stresses of your illness.

How do I get help for fatigue? Write a list for your doctor or nurse:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFORMATION</th>
<th>YOUR NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much do you sleep at night? How often do you rest during the day?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How well are you eating and drinking? Have you lost weight?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you experiencing pain, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What medications are you taking?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you always tired, or are some days are better than others?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What makes you more tired? What have you tried to feel better?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you worried about something? Is something making you feel sad and preventing you from sleeping well?</td>
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<td>How is fatigue affecting your daily living, your mood and your relationships with others?</td>
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What can I do to relieve fatigue? Self-care and how to cope

Once your doctor has addressed any physical or medication-related reasons for your fatigue, there are some coping strategies and things you can try on your own.

- **Plan periods of rest and periods of activity** to maximize the energy you have available for things that are really important to you.
- **Ask others to help you** with tasks that you no longer are able to manage.
- **Try to eat a balanced diet** with sufficient calories to provide your body with the energy it needs. If you find you get full quickly, eat smaller meals more often, and consider adding a nutritional supplement drink, which contains all of the calories and nutrients of a well-balanced meal. Your care team can arrange for a dietitian to speak with you to make sure you are getting enough calories. Try to drink enough fluid as well to keep your body hydrated.
- **Limit caffeine and alcohol intake**, as these can affect your ability to sleep and how well you sleep.
- **If your doctor agrees, get moving with 30 minutes of moderate daily exercise** such as walking, cycling, and swimming. Exercise will help you maintain muscle strength and mass and improves your breathing and heart function in order to maintain good oxygen levels to your cells. When you exercise your brain also releases chemicals called endorphins that help you feel better and more alert.
- **Try things to help you relax**. For instance, getting a massage, listening to music, spending time outside in a quiet, natural place if weather permits, doing a creative activity like drawing or writing, or imagining you are in a place that you enjoy visiting.
- **If you need to rest during the day**, try to limit the length of time you sleep so that you get a longer, more restful sleep at night. Your bedroom should be a quiet environment and kept at a comfortable temperature for you to sleep.
- **Take your medications as prescribed** so that your symptoms are properly controlled.
- **Talk with family members or your care team** about things that are worrying you or that make you feel sad. If you let others know how you are feeling, they can help you find strategies to deal with your concerns and ways to cope with those feelings.

Remember, you are not alone. Your care team is there to help you manage your fatigue and to help you continue to maintain your quality of life.

References: