

Cancer-Related Fatigue

Overview

When healthy individuals experience fatigue, it can be relieved by sleep and rest. Cancer-related fatigue is a daily lack of energy or strength and unusual or excessive whole-body exhaustion that, unlike tiredness, is not the result of activity or exertion and cannot be relieved by rest or sleep. Cancer-related fatigue is the most common symptom experienced by cancer patients. Most patients consider fatigue to be one of their most distressing symptoms, which can often disrupt a patient's normal routine and even cause changes in their work status. Historically, cancer-related fatigue was underreported, underdiagnosed, and undertreated; however, a renewed focus by the healthcare community is helping to address this lapse.

One of the challenges in managing cancer-related fatigue is being able to distinguish it from other issues such as depression. Cancer-related fatigue often occurs with other symptoms, such as pain or distress, and is known to occur with depression in cancer patients. There are many factors, including the disease, treatments, medications, pain, nutritional deficits, metabolic changes, stress, insomnia, anxiety, and depression, that can cause cancer-related fatigue. Cancer treatment such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, stem cell transplantation, and biologic therapy are often associated with fatigue. Anemia (a decrease in red blood cells, which carry oxygen throughout the body) can result from either a patient's lymphoma or cancer treatments and can also lead to fatigue. With decreased oxygen levels, it becomes more difficult for the body to sustain its normal activity levels.

Managing fatigue is an important part of the total healthcare of individual patients; therefore, patients are usually assessed for fatigue at diagnosis and throughout the course of their disease management. Cancer-related fatigue can last long after treatment is complete.

Symptoms of Fatigue

- Extreme weariness and/or overall lack of energy, even after sleeping
- Muscle weakness, especially in the arms and legs; difficulty climbing stairs or walking short distances

- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty performing simple tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, making the bed, or taking a shower)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Moodiness, frustration, and/or irritability
- Waking up tired after a full night's sleep

It is important that patients inform their physician about their fatigue, so it can be evaluated. Although not all causes of cancer-related fatigue are well understood, the patient's physician may want to perform tests to try to determine what might be causing the fatigue. Patients should be as specific as possible about their level of fatigue and when it occurs (such as in the morning, after treatment, etc.), as well as the activities that cause the most difficulty. As with other aspects of cancer and its treatment, fatigue varies from person to person.

Fatigue can have an extremely negative impact on one's quality of life. The severity of fatigue and how long it lasts depends on many factors including the type and length of cancer treatment and a patient's overall health status. Many patients and physicians do not discuss fatigue because they believe nothing can be done about it. Although fatigue may not be completely preventable, the following tips may help patients manage or minimize this troublesome symptom.

Patient Tips for Managing Fatigue

- Keep a diary to help identify which times of the day or times related to treatment cycles you have the most energy. Document which activities make you feel fatigued or energized. This information can help you plan your activities around the times you have the most energy and will also help you communicate with your physician.
- Delegate. Ask family or friends for assistance with your most energy-draining activities or chores that must be done during your lowest energy times. Often, family members or friends are happy to help with chores and other everyday tasks.

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Supported through grants from:



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Last Updated March 2015

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- Make sure you schedule appropriate time to rest between your daily activities. Prioritize tasks so your energy is used to accomplish your most important tasks or those that cannot be delegated.
- Organize your surroundings. Keep the items you need most frequently in an easily accessible location.
- Consider if you are experiencing any specific symptoms that may be related to fatigue. Treating or managing symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, pain, fever, or lingering depression can help increase your energy supply.
- Avoid food and drinks that may not provide you with sustainable energy. For example, drinking too much caffeine can cause fatigue.
- Try to identify any causes of stress. Speak with a professional counselor to help you cope with the stress of your illness, and incorporate relaxation or other stress-relieving techniques into your routine.
- Exercise if your physician recommends it. An expert on your healthcare team can help you develop a personalized exercise plan.
- Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, and drink at least eight glasses of water each day. Review your diet with your physician or a nutrition counselor. Treatment and recovery often put extra demands on your body for calories, nutrition, and fluids.
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule. If you are having trouble sleeping, consult your healthcare team about possible solutions. In addition, napping can be a quick refresher, but avoid spending too much time in bed.

Treatment for Fatigue

If tests determine that a patient's fatigue is caused by anemia or low thyroid hormone levels, for example, a physician may prescribe treatments for these conditions that will also relieve their fatigue. For patients with advanced disease or those receiving cancer treatments, psychostimulants such as methylphenidate or wakefulness agents such as modafinil may help. However, these drugs do not seem to work well in patients who are disease free and not receiving cancer treatments.

Support

A lymphoma diagnosis often triggers a range of feelings and raises concerns. In addition, cancer treatment can cause physical discomfort. Support groups and online message boards can help patients connect with other people who have lymphoma. One-to-one peer support programs, such as the Lymphoma Research Foundation's (LRF) Lymphoma Support Network, match lymphoma patients (or caregivers) with volunteers who have gone through similar experiences.

Resources

LRF offers a wide range of resources that address treatment options, the latest research advances, and ways to cope with all aspects of lymphoma, including our award-winning mobile app. LRF also provides many educational activities, from in-person meetings to teleconferences and webcasts, as well as E-Updates that provide the latest disease-specific news and treatment options. For more information about any of these resources, visit our website at www.lymphoma.org, or contact the LRF Helpline at (800) 500-9976 or helpline@lymphoma.org.