

# Fatigue

*Most patients will experience fatigue during their course of treatment and many will have persistent fatigue after treatment. These issues may profoundly affect quality of life of both patients and their families and are routinely identified by patients as some of the most distressing symptoms associated with cancer and its treatment.*

## What is fatigue and what are some causes?

Fatigue is a persistent feeling of physical, emotional, or mental tiredness that does not improve with rest. Fatigue in cancer patients often has many causes. Some of the things that can contribute to fatigue include anemia (low level of red blood cells), hormone imbalance (levels are too high or too low), inadequate nutrition due to loss of appetite or dehydration, lack of exercise, and sleep disturbance.

## How should I be evaluated and treated?

Your medical provider will perform a focused history and physical exam to evaluate your fatigue. You may be advised to have some lab work to evaluate for conditions associated with fatigue. Your medical provider will work with you to treat any condition causing or exacerbating fatigue, such as pain, anxiety, depression, poor sleep, poor nutrition, or anemia and will evaluate you for possible side effects from medications.

## What are some strategies for treating and coping with my symptoms?

- Clinical trials consistently show that regular exercise will reduce fatigue. Although it may seem counterintuitive to exercise when you are tired, gradually increasing exercise will increase endurance and energy over time. Try to build up to 150 minutes a week of moderate activity, such as fast walking, swimming, or cycling, or use your Smartphone or a pedometer to count steps with a goal of 10,000 steps per day.
- Meet with a nutritionist who can work with you to ensure that you are getting enough calories, fluids, protein, and other nutrients.
- The emotional burden of cancer can be exhausting; meeting with a therapist or support group to reframe your thoughts and feelings about coping with your cancer and fatigue can improve your mood and energy level.
- Ensure a good night's sleep by avoiding daytime naps, taking a warm bath, or drinking a glass of warm milk prior to bedtime. Try to avoid caffeinated beverages after noon.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy programs can also reduce fatigue. This type of program is typically administered by a psychologist or therapist and can help you to develop a mental training program to overcome fatigue.
- Results of research on using psychostimulants in patients with cancer-related fatigue have been mixed, with most failing to demonstrate a statistically significant benefit over placebo.

## Still have questions?

To learn more, visit [www.dana-farber.org/survivor](http://www.dana-farber.org/survivor) or contact the Adult Survivorship Program at **617-632-4LAD (Life After Diagnosis)** or [dfci\\_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu](mailto:dfci_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu).

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## Adult Survivorship Program

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