



## FACT SHEET

# Cancer Related Fatigue

### Definition

“Cancer related fatigue is a subjective, unpleasant symptom which incorporates total body feelings ranging from tiredness to exhaustion creating an unrelenting overall condition which interferes with individuals’ ability to function”.

### What does it feel like?

“It’s like when you run a race and you are exhausted ... you’re really drained, as if you want to be wound up again”.

“Everything is too much effort. It is ridiculous. Just to comb your hair or get dressed is too much effort. It was as much as I could do to get out of bed or go to the loo”.

“I couldn’t cope with doing the hoovering - it is too much, I couldn’t even lift the Hoover”.

### How common is it?

Estimates range 60% - 100% according to tumour site, stage and treatment

In people undergoing chemotherapy - 65% - 100%

In people undergoing radiation treatment up to 100%

### What effect does it have on me?

#### Physical effects

- Difficulty doing everyday activities
- A feeling of having no energy or strength
- A feeling of being ‘drained’
- Dizziness / feeling light headed

#### Cognitive effects

- Difficulty thinking and speaking
- Difficulty remembering
- Difficulty concentrating



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### Feelings

- Insomnia
- Low sex drive
- Feeling more emotional than usual
- Difficulty coping

### What causes Cancer Related Fatigue?

Physical problems, stress, or difficulties in your daily life can cause fatigue.

The cause and degree of fatigue often has many factors such as -

- anaemia
- fever
- pain
- radiotherapy treatment
- anxiety
- infections
- surgery
- chemotherapy treatment
- other treatments (Interferon, GCSF)
- other medications
- depression
- shortness of breath
- nausea or vomiting
- being unable to eat or drink properly
- changes in sleeping patterns
- the cancer itself

### So what can be done about it?

- Correct potential causes – treat infections, treat nausea, correct anaemia, treat pain adequately, oxygen therapy if indicated, correct abnormal lab results (calcium, thyroxine, magnesium & potassium for example) – you can discuss these things with your doctor or nurse
- Ensure nutrition intake is adequate – you can discuss this with your dietician
- Ensure you are drinking enough (2 – 3 litres a day if you can)
- If you are depressed – talk to your doctor, nurse or social worker about this and they can arrange for you to see the clinical psychologist or you may even need tablets to help you with your depression



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- Discuss with your doctor about reducing or stopping non-essential medications
- Sleep patterns - sometimes you may need to look at your sleep patterns as these can be altered, especially if you have been in hospital. Some people may need a light sleeping tablet to help them to get back to sleeping through the night
- Exercise – many studies are now showing that gentle aerobic exercise, such as walking or cycling , can actually help to reduce cancer related fatigue
- Establish reasonable expectations for yourself – the **3 P's** -
  - ⇒ **Plan** your days – include rest periods and include 'time out' for yourself. Don't plan a busy day out on the day following a clinic or treatment day for example.
  - ⇒ **Prioritise** – do the most important/enjoyable tasks first and if you don't feel like doing the rest – don't worry because it wasn't important
  - ⇒ **Pace** yourself – learn how much you are comfortable doing and which are the best times of the day – and plan accordingly
- Talk about how you are feeling – at the hospital and at home. Friends and relatives often don't understand just how tired you are feeling and how long it goes on for – share with them how you are feeling
- Ask yourself –
  - ⇒ Have I experienced tiredness or weakness or another symptom today?
  - ⇒ How severe was it?
  - ⇒ How much did it bother me?
  - ⇒ Keep a diary – learn about your own fatigue patterns, learn what makes it better, learn what makes it worse

***Above all – remember that cancer related fatigue is totally normal – 100% of patients can't be wrong can they?***