



## Cancer Related Fatigue (CRF)

"I am so tired I cannot move. What is wrong with me?" Many cancer patients have this question, especially when they are in active treatment. Cancer related fatigue can come on suddenly and be completely overwhelming. For everyone fatigue presents differently. Per the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), the number of patients affected by CRF is estimated to be anywhere from 70 - 100%. The NCCN defines cancer related fatigue as "as a distressing, persistent subjective sense of tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer or cancer treatment that is not proportional to recent activity and interferes with usual functioning." If you are one of those affected with CRF you understand the impact it can have on your quality of life. I will be addressing what may cause fatigue, the signs and symptoms of cancer related fatigue and most importantly what you can do to increase your quality of life and decrease the effects of this sometimes devastating symptom of cancer and its treatment.

What is the cause of cancer related fatigue? The cause of fatigue in cancer patients is unknown. Some factors commonly associated with fatigue include:

- \* Treatment modalities:
  - \* Chemotherapy
  - \* Radiation Therapy
  - \* Bone Marrow Transplant
  - \* Biological Therapy
  - \* Combination Therapy
- \* Anemia
- \* Medications
- \* Weight loss
- \* Decreased appetite/nutrition
- \* Metabolic changes
- \* Hormone imbalances
- \* Sleep Disturbances



- \* Inactivity
- \* Breathing difficulties
- \* Loss of strength and muscle coordination
- \* Pain
- \* Infections
- \* Other medical conditions besides cancer

Let's look at some of these in closer detail:

**TREATMENT:** Chemotherapy - medications given to kill cancer cells, radiation therapy - the use of ionizing radiation to control cancer cells, bone marrow transplant - where healthy bone marrow is transplanted into a patient who's bone marrow is not working properly, biologic therapy - a mechanism where the bodies' natural defense system is stimulated to fight cancer, and combination therapy, where any of the above treatments are used together, i.e.: chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Any or all of the above treatments can be linked to fatigue. The incidence of CRF seems to be greater when treatment options are combined.

Upon completion of treatment, not all patients return to pre-treatment energy levels although symptoms tend to improve with passage of time. Risk factors for persistent decreased energy levels include increased age, advanced disease and combination therapy.

**ANEMIA-** there are many types of anemia but those associated with cancer or cancer treatment are usually the result of effects on the bone marrow. Chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy may prevent the bone marrow from producing adequate numbers of red blood cells making it more difficult for various organs of the body to get enough oxygen to function efficiently. Some cancers themselves affect the bone marrow's ability to produce enough red blood cells to meet bodily needs.

**MEDICATIONS-** taken for cancer treatment, side effect management, or other conditions can cause fatigue.

Weight loss, Decreased appetite/nutrition, Metabolic changes - all of the above put a patient at an increased risk of inadequate intake at a time when the body has greater energy demands. In other words, patients take in less than their body needs to function, resulting in fatigue.

Sleep Disturbances, Inactivity, Breathing difficulties,

Loss of strength and muscle coordination - sleeping too much, too little, or changes in the ability to do activities of daily living can increase the risk of fatigue.

As you can see there are many different reasons why a person with cancer may experience fatigue. The actual cause of cancer related fatigue remains unknown, but it can greatly impact the quality of a patient's life.

The signs and symptoms of cancer related fatigue are different for everyone. Patients need to know what signs and symptoms to watch for so treatment can begin early before fatigue becomes debilitating. One way to decrease the effect of fatigue is to treat the underlying cause. For example, if a patient is not eating because of nausea, treatment of the nausea may allow the patient to eat better decreasing the risk of fatigue.

Future presentations will cover the signs and symptoms of cancer related fatigue and what a patient can do to decrease the side effects of CRF.

#### References:

[http://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician\\_gls/PDF/fatigue.pdf](http://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/PDF/fatigue.pdf)

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

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

[www.ons.org](http://www.ons.org)

Fatigue presents differently for everyone. Cancer related fatigue can come on suddenly and be completely overwhelming. It may develop gradually over a period of weeks, as a patient gets further through their treatment regime. Sometimes the symptoms are subtle and are attributed to something else.

Fatigue and depression, common conditions in patients with cancer, have very similar symptoms so it is important to thoroughly discuss your symptoms with your health care provider. Be honest when describing the severity of what you feel. Treatments for fatigue and depression are different so your provider needs your assistance to be able to provide the best treatment choices. What are some of the signs or symptoms a person might experience if they have Cancer Related Fatigue? The American Cancer Society states that signs of cancer related fatigue may include:

- Feeling tired, weary or exhausted even after sleeping (sleep is not refreshing)
- Not wanting to or not being able to do regular activities
- Having trouble concentrating, thinking clearly, or remembering
- Trouble finding words or speaking
- Feeling negative, irritable, impatient or unmotivated



- Lacking interest in normal day to day activities
- Spending less attention on personal appearance
- Spending more time in bed or sleeping, increased sleeping
- Lack of energy

Other symptoms of cancer related fatigue may include:

- Body, arms and legs feeling heavy
- Decreased motivation
- Reacting to circumstances in a very emotional way (out of proportion to the situation)
- Real or perceived problems with short term memory
- Insomnia
- Trouble completing daily tasks
- Anemia is implicated as a cause of cancer related fatigue. Symptoms of anemia include:
  - Weakness
  - Pale skin
  - A fast or irregular heartbeat
  - Shortness of breath
  - Chest pain
  - Dizziness
  - Cognitive problems
  - Numbness or coldness in extremities
  - Headache

Having any of the above symptoms may be an indication you are experiencing cancer related fatigue. The National Cancer Institute recommends that patients be aware of the following:

- The difference between fatigue and depression. Per the breastcancer.org web site, the difference between depression and fatigue is that the symptoms of clinical depression include:
  - an inability to cope
  - an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and hopelessness
  - inertia
  - an inability to concentrate
  - memory problems
  - panic attacks
  - loss of pleasure in what used to make you happy
  - lack of interest in sex or food
  - sleep problems
- Other medical conditions may cause fatigue such as -dehydration, breathing difficulties, or anemia. (See above for anemia side effects.)

Knowing the signs and symptoms of cancer related fatigue is important for several reasons. The first is so that patients can recognize it early and take steps to decrease its impact on their quality of life. The second is so that you can relay the symptoms you are experiencing to your physician, so he/she can accurately treat you. Part three of the fatigue series will focus on how to manage cancer related fatigue.

Now that you know what cancer related fatigue (CRF) is and some of the symptoms you may experience, what are you going to do about it? Can you decrease the symptoms of cancer related fatigue? Cancer related fatigue can be managed and that will be the focus of this presentation.

The American Cancer Society lists 7 ways to manage cancer related fatigue. The seven ways they recommend are:

1. Rest, but not too much
2. Stay active
3. Save your energy
4. Get help with tasks
5. Get support
6. Eat well
7. Call your Doctor

Let's look at a few of these in more detail.

1. **STAY ACTIVE-** Check with your doctor before starting any exercise program. Mild to moderate exercise programs have been found to be beneficial in managing fatigue. Start any exercise program slowly. The old adage, "exercise until it hurts is NOT accurate. If you are sore, stiff or exhausted after exercising you are overdoing it. Remember to exercise with caution and do not over do it. Some activities that may be beneficial are:

- Walking
- Yoga
- Swimming

2. **SAVE YOUR ENERGY-** Energy Conservation is important!

The 4 P's of energy conservation are: planning, positioning, pacing and prioritizing.

- Planning-do it on a day by day basis and choose activities you enjoy. Set aside time for rest, exercise, and things you find important in life.
- Positioning-How you hold your body during activities. It takes less energy to sit, than it does to stand.
- Pacing-how fast you work. Find a balance between activity and rest.
- Prioritizing-identify what you can do, what needs to be eliminated and what needs to be delegated to someone else. Ask for help.

3. **GET HELP WITH TASKS-**Give family and friends the chance to have pleasure and satisfaction by helping you.



4. EAT WELL - If you eat healthy and maintain your nutritional status you feel better. Adequate nutrition and hydration is important and here are some basic suggestions.

- Drink 6-10 glasses of liquid a day, unless your care team recommends otherwise. Water and juice are best. Do not fill up on liquids at the expense of eating more nutritious foods.
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Seek nutritional advice about iron and vitamin rich foods and/or supplements
- Eat foods high in protein, such as fish, cheese, tuna, milk, and peanut butter, if approved by your doctor
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day rather than 3 large meals
- Try to eat even if you don't feel like it Be creative in meals and meal preparation to help stimulate appetite
- Trust your own instincts about foods you are most likely to tolerate

Though everyone experiences cancer fatigue differently, the following tips may help you manage your symptoms:

- Limit activities if possible
- Do not push yourself to do more than you can do
- Conserve energy
- Plan Your day
- Plan rest periods
- Take naps- DO NOT nap too long (30-60 minutes is recommended)
- Spread your activities throughout the day
- Identify fatigue promoting activities
- Do activities that you enjoy
- Ask for assistance when needed
- Take care of your emotional self
- Know your nutritional needs
- Use relaxation techniques and meditation
- Keep a journal or diary
- Find new hobbies that are less physically demanding
- Create a bedtime routine
- Have FUN. Humor can be helpful

The following suggestions from the Oncology Nursing Society may also be beneficial.

### **Suggested Strategies for Energy Conservation**

#### **Activities of Daily Living**

- Sit down to bathe and dry off. Wear a terry robe instead of drying off.
- Use a shower/bath organizer to decrease leaning and reaching.
- Install grab rails in the bathroom.



- Use extension handles on sponges and brushes.
- Use an elevated toilet seat.

### **Organize time to avoid rushing.**

- Lay out clothes and toiletries before dressing.
- Minimize leaning over to put on clothes and shoes.
- Bring your foot to your knee to apply socks and shoes. Fasten bra in front then turn to back.
- Modify the home environment to maximize efficient use of energy. Example: Place chairs to allow rest stops (e.g. along a long hallway).
- Wear comfortable clothes and low-heeled, slip on shoes. Wear button front shirts rather than pull-overs.

### **Housekeeping**

- Schedule household tasks throughout the week.
- Do housework sitting down when possible. Use long-handled dusters, dust mops, etc. Use a wheeled cart or carpenter's apron to carry supplies.
- Delegate heavy housework, shopping, laundry, and child care when possible.
- Drag or slide objects rather than lifting. Use proper body mechanics. Use your leg muscles not your back when working.
- Sit when ironing and take rest periods.
- Stop working before becoming tired.

### **Shopping**

- Organize list by aisle.
- Use a grocery cart for support.
- Shop at less-busy times.
- Request assistance in getting to the car.



- Purchase clothing that doesn't require ironing.

### **Meal Preparation**

- Use convenience foods/easy-to-prepare foods.
- Use small appliances (they take less effort to use).
- Arrange the preparation environment for easy access to frequently used items.
- Prepare meals sitting down.
- Soak dishes instead of scrubbing and let dishes air dry.
- Prepare double portions and freeze half.

### **Child Care**

- Plan activities to allow for sitting down (e.g., drawing, pictures, playing games, reading, and computer games).
- Teach children to climb up on the lap or into the highchair instead of being lifted.
- Make a game of the household chores so that children will want to help.
- Delegate childcare when possible.

### **Workplace**

- Plan workload to take advantage of peak energy times. Alternate physically demanding tasks with sedentary tasks.
- Arrange work environment for easy access to commonly used equipment and supplies.

### **Leisure**

- Do activities with a companion.
- Select activities that match energy level.
- Balance activity and rest (don't get overtired).

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Note. Based on information from Donovan, E. (1995, October 25). "Energy conservation." In Fatigue Initiative through Research and Education (FIRE ® ) course. Educational program sponsored by Oncology Nursing Society and Ortho Biotech Inc., Phoenix, AZ.

**Contact your Doctor/nurse for the following:**

- ☞ If you feel dizzy
- ☞ If you fall or have a loss of balance
- ☞ Experience increased fatigue
- ☞ Have trouble waking up in the morning or staying awake
- ☞ Have confusion
- ☞ Have trouble sleeping
- ☞ Have a sudden increase in fatigue

If you experience any of the above symptoms it is IMPORTANT to contact you doctor.

References:

[http://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician\\_gls/PDF/fatigue.pdf](http://www.nccn.org/professionals/physician_gls/PDF/fatigue.pdf)

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