

Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

This information is about fatigue. Fatigue means feeling very tired. It can be caused by cancer or cancer treatments.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can talk to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need.

There is more cancer information in other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

This information is about:

- What is fatigue?
- The effects of fatigue
- What causes fatigue?
- Getting a cancer diagnosis
- Getting help with fatigue
- Ways to manage fatigue
- Emotional support
- Tips for managing everyday activities
- Coping with fatigue at work
- Caring for someone with fatigue
- Getting the right care and support for you
- How Macmillan can help you
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What is fatigue?

Fatigue is when you feel very tired most or all of the time. It is a common problem for people with cancer. Fatigue in people with cancer is sometimes called cancer-related fatigue or [CRF].

Fatigue caused by cancer is different from the tiredness that someone without cancer can get. People with cancer may get tired more quickly after activity. Resting or sleeping does not help to relieve the tiredness.

For most people, fatigue gets better after treatment finishes. But for some it may continue for months or even years.

The effects of fatigue

Fatigue can affect you in different ways. Some of the common effects of fatigue are:

- difficulty doing simple things, such as brushing your hair or getting dressed
- feeling you have no energy or strength
- difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- difficulty thinking, speaking or making decisions
- feeling breathless after light activity
- feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- difficulty sleeping (insomnia) or sleeping more than usual
- losing interest in sex
- feeling more emotional than usual.

It can be frustrating and overwhelming when you feel tired most of the time. It is important to tell your doctors and nurses about how it makes you feel. There are ways they may be able to help. There are also things you can do for yourself that may help. For example, being physically active can help your fatigue.

What causes fatigue?

We do not fully understand what causes cancer-related fatigue. There may be many reasons for it. It may be caused by:

Cancer

For some people cancer may cause fatigue.

Some cancers cells can irritate the lining of the tummy. This can cause the tummy to make too much fluid. Too much fluid in the tummy is called ascites. Ascites can cause discomfort and fatigue.

You may feel tired because the cancer has reduced the number of red blood cells in the body. Cells are the tiny building blocks that make up the organs and tissues of our body. A reduced number of red blood cells is called anaemia.

Hormones are a substance made by the body that control how organs work. Some cancers, such as breast and prostate cancer, can change the level of hormones in your body. This change can affect the way the body uses energy and may cause fatigue.

Cancer may affect the levels of cytokines in the body. Cytokines are a type of protein. They help control some of the things that cells do. Cytokines may be involved in cancer-related fatigue.

Cancer treatments

Doctors are still learning about why cancer treatments can cause fatigue. It might be because:

- the body needs extra energy to repair and heal
- there is a build-up of chemicals as the cancer cells are destroyed
- the body's immune system is affected

These cancer treatments may make you feel tired:

- **Surgery** – Surgery is a way of treating cancer by removing all or part of the cancer. This is also known as having an operation. Many people feel tired after surgery. It usually improves after a few weeks. Avoid doing too much for a while. You may have been anxious before your operation and not been sleeping well. Some medicines for pain can make you feel tired.
- **Chemotherapy and radiotherapy** – Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer cells. Radiotherapy is a cancer treatment that uses high energy rays, such as x-rays, to kill cancer cells. These treatments can cause fatigue. Fatigue usually improves 6 to 12 months after treatment ends. But sometimes it can last longer. Sometimes these treatments may cause long-term effects such as breathlessness (uncomfortable or fast breathing) or heart problems. These are likely to make you feel more tired. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy may also cause anaemia.
- **Hormonal therapy** – A cancer treatment that works by affecting hormones in the body. Some of these therapies can cause fatigue.
- **Targeted therapy** - A cancer treatment that uses drugs that target and attack cancer cells. Some of these therapies can cause fatigue.
- **Immunotherapy** - The immune system protects the body against illness and infection. Immunotherapies are treatments that use the immune system to find and attack cancer cells. Some of these therapies can cause fatigue.

Anaemia

Anaemia is when you have a low number of red blood cells. Red blood cells contain a protein called haemoglobin (Hb), which carries oxygen around the body. If you do not have enough red blood cells, this reduces the amount of oxygen your body gets. This can make you feel tired. If you have anaemia, you may also feel:

- breathless
- dizzy and light-headed
- tight in the chest.

Anaemia may be caused by chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Your doctor can check if you have anaemia. If you do have it, you may need treatment to make you feel better.

Eating problems

If you are not eating the same amount of food as you would normally, this may cause you to have less energy and feel tired. Some people lose weight even if they are eating a lot. This is because of the effect of the cancer on the body. It is important to tell your nurse or doctor if you are having problems eating.

If you feel sick and cannot eat, your doctor may be able to give you medicine to help. If you cannot take medicine for nausea, or cannot keep it down due to vomiting, speak to your doctor or nurse. There are other ways of taking anti-sickness medicines.

Pain

Pain can cause fatigue. If you have pain, painkillers and other treatments can help to relieve it. If your pain is relieved, this can also help your fatigue.

Other medical problems

Other medical problems may also make fatigue worse. If you are taking medicines for other conditions, these can sometimes make you feel tired too. Other medical problems that effect fatigue are:

- diabetes - a condition where the amount of sugar in the blood is too high because the body does not use it properly.
- thyroid problems - the thyroid is a gland in the neck. It makes hormones that help control the way your body functions.
- heart problems - such as heart failure.

Sleeping problems

Sleep problems when you have cancer are very common. Sleep is important for:

- physical health
- emotional wellbeing
- restoring energy
- concentration and memory.

Trouble sleeping (insomnia) over a long period of time can cause fatigue, low mood and difficulties with concentration.

Emotional effects of cancer

Fatigue can be caused by the emotional effects of cancer. People feel different emotions when they have cancer. You might feel worried, sad or angry. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

There are different types of emotional support you may find helpful, including talking and complementary therapies.

Getting a fatigue diagnosis

Before your fatigue can be treated, it is important it is properly assessed. Tell a member of your healthcare team if you have fatigue at any time.

Your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or GP will ask you some questions about your fatigue. Or they may use a questionnaire that asks you about the cancer, how you are feeling and how you cope with everyday activities.

Your doctor will check for any causes of fatigue that can be treated, such as anaemia. They may examine you and give you some blood tests. They might also look at the medicines you are taking to see if adjusting them could help.

Getting help with fatigue

Drug treatments for fatigue

There are not any drug treatments to help prevent or improve fatigue yet. Steroid drugs can sometimes be helpful. But they can have side effects, so you should talk to your doctor about whether they are right for you.

Research trials are carried out to try to find new and better drug treatments. This includes drug treatments for fatigue. Many hospitals now take part in these trials. Speak to your doctor about whether you could take part in a research trial on treating fatigue.

Getting support

There are members of your healthcare team who can help you manage your fatigue:

- **Cancer doctor or GP** – can help find out what is causing your fatigue and ways to manage it.
- **Clinical nurse specialist** – can assess and provide information and support about practical ways to manage fatigue. For example, if there are any support groups or activities such as exercise classes near where you live.
- **Physiotherapist** – can give advice on exercise and moving around. They can help you manage other symptoms such as breathlessness.
- **Occupational therapist** – can provide information, support and aids to help with everyday activities such as washing and dressing.
- **Social worker** – can help with practical and financial problems. They may help with arranging a carer to help at home.
- **Counsellor** – can listen and support you with any worries or concerns.

Ways to manage fatigue

There are different things you can do to manage your fatigue. Some of these may reduce your fatigue. Others may help you to cope better.

Planning ahead

If you have fatigue, planning ahead is important. This helps to make sure you can still do the things you most want to do. For example, you could:

- use a diary to record when you feel your best and when you feel most tired
- try to plan bigger tasks for times when you are likely to feel less tired
- plan enough time to rest after a period of activity.

Make sure you look after your own needs, even if you have others to think about.

Healthy diet and weight

- Eating well and keeping to a healthy weight can help increase your energy. If you have a reduced appetite or other problems eating, ask to see a dietitian at the hospital. They are an expert in food and nutrition. They can give you advice on what is best to eat.
- If you have taste changes, try different foods or eat foods that taste best to you until things improve.
- When you are hungry, make sure you eat well. Always try to drink plenty of fluids.
- Keep a diary each day of what you eat and when. Then you can see if you have more energy after certain foods.

Physical activity

If you have fatigue, you may become less active. When your muscles are not being used regularly, they become weaker. Physical activity can help reduce fatigue. Being active may help to:

- boost your appetite - this is when you feel you want to eat food
- give you more energy
- build up your muscle strength
- improve sleep.

Before you start doing any physical activity or increase the amount you do, it is important to get advice from a healthcare professional. They can advise you on the type and amount that is safe for you. Your cancer specialist or GP can also refer you to a physiotherapist. A physiotherapist can help you build up your physical fitness and muscle strength. Specialist cancer physiotherapists may be available in some areas.

Tips for keeping active

- Do not exercise if you feel unwell, are in pain or have any other symptoms that worry you, such as feeling breathless. Let your GP or cancer doctor know if you feel like this.
- Set yourself simple achievable goals. Try not to do too much too soon.
- Plan some activity into your day. For example, walk to the shops instead of driving, if you can.
- Try some regular, gentle exercise, such as walking. Or simple strengthening exercises, such as climbing stairs.
- Do something you enjoy, such as gardening.

Sleep

Your fatigue may make you feel like you want to sleep all the time. But it is important to keep to a sleep routine. Try to sleep between 6 and 8 hours each night. Good quality sleep may help with fatigue. It may also reduce your need to sleep during the day.

Tips for a better night's sleep:

- Go to bed and wake up at about the same time every day.
- Try not to sleep late into the day after a sleepless night. This can lead to a disrupted sleep pattern.
- Try to do gentle exercise like walking. This can help you feel naturally tired and ready for sleep.
- Keep your mind occupied with activities like reading, games or puzzles. This can also help you feel naturally ready to sleep.
- Be aware of how naps affect you. Some people find that daytime naps help them to sleep better at night. Others sleep less well after them.
- Try out a relaxing routine before bed. A warm bath or shower, reading or listening to soothing music might help.
- Steroids can cause sleep problems. If you are taking steroids, ask your doctor if you can take them earlier in the day.
- Alcohol and caffeine can stop you from falling asleep. Try to cut down on alcohol. And avoid caffeine close to bedtime.

Emotional support

Counselling

Fatigue can affect your emotions. It can make you feel more anxious or low in mood. If you are struggling emotionally, you may find counselling helpful. Counsellors are trained to listen. They can help you to deal with difficult emotions.

Many hospitals have counsellors who are specially trained to provide emotional support to people affected by cancer. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can tell you what services are available. They can also refer you. Some GPs also have counsellors in their practice, or they can refer you to one.

You may need to pay for some counsellors.

Support groups

Some people find it helps to talk to other people who have had fatigue. Most places in the UK have support groups. A healthcare professional sometimes leads them. Other members of the group may be in a similar position to you.

You can call our Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00** to find out about support groups in your area. We can also try to find out if there is a support group where people use the same language as you.

Online support

Many people get support on the internet. Online support groups for people affected by cancer include:

- social networking sites
- forums
- chat rooms
- blogs.

You can use these to ask questions, get support, and give advice yourself. The [Macmillan Online Community] is an online cancer forum where you can talk to people and share your experience. There are many different groups. For example, we have groups for:

- specific cancer types
- family members and friends
- LGBTQ+ people
- practical issues.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are activities that can make you feel better. They do not treat cancer. But they can help you to cope with its symptoms or with the side effects of your cancer treatment.

There are different complementary therapies that may help with fatigue, such as:

- Relaxation techniques – a type of complementary therapy that can calm the mind and reduce muscle tension.
- Massage therapy – a complementary therapy that uses touch and gentle pressure to relieve tension.
- Yoga – a type of exercise using gentle stretching, deep breathing and movement.

Before you use a complementary therapy, talk to your specialist doctor or nurse. Some therapies may affect your cancer treatment.

Some of these therapies may be available on the NHS. Your GP can give you more information. You may also be able to access them through a cancer support group.

To stay safe, it is important to always check a therapist's qualifications and experience treating people with cancer. If you need help with this, ask your doctor or nurse, or call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 0000**.

Tips for managing everyday activities

If you need help with things at home, you may be able to ask family, friends and neighbours. Having a support network can make a big difference. Your family and friends may not realise how much you need help. Or they may be waiting for you to ask for help.

There are things you can do that may help with everyday tasks.

Housekeeping

- Spread tasks out over the week. Do a little housework each day rather than lots at one time.
- If possible, ask other people to do heavy work such as gardening.
- Sit down to do some tasks if you can.

Shopping

- Make a list before you start so you do not waste energy or time.
- If possible, go grocery shopping with a friend or family member for extra help.
- Most large supermarkets offer online shopping which can be delivered to your home.
- Use a shopping trolley so you do not need to carry a heavy basket. A wheeled shopping bag may help with shopping and getting things home.
- Shop at less busy times.
- Ask shop staff for help with packing and taking groceries to the car.

Preparing meals

- Prepare extra meals or double portions when you are feeling less tired and freeze them for when you need them.
- Try having ready-made meals when you are most tired.
- If you can, sit down while preparing meals.

Washing and dressing

- Sit down in the bath rather than standing in a shower if you can. This may help to use less energy.
- Sit down in the shower to avoid standing for too long. An occupational therapist may be able to get you a shower seat.
- Wear clothes that are easy to put on and take off.
- Sit down when you are getting dressed.

Occupational therapists

Occupational therapists help people who have difficulty moving around or doing everyday tasks. They may be able to visit you at home to help you find ways to do things more easily. Your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or GP can refer you to an occupational therapist.

Childcare

If you have a family, you might find it difficult to look after them while coping with fatigue. It can be upsetting when you are unable to do your usual family activities. There are things you could do to make childcare easier:

- Explain to any children that you feel tired often and will not be able to do as much with them as before.
- Plan activities with them that you can do sitting down. Such as board games or puzzles.
- Try to plan activities where there are places for you to sit down while the children play.
- Avoid carrying small children. Use a pram or pushchair instead.
- Try to involve children in some household tasks.
- Ask for and accept help from family and friends.

Driving

If you feel very tired, driving can be difficult and dangerous. You may be less alert than normal and less able to concentrate. Your reaction time may also be reduced. You might find these tips helpful:

- Do not drive if you feel very tired.
- If possible, ask a family member or friend to drive you.
- If you need to get to hospital appointments, ask your nurse or doctor if there is any hospital transport available.
- If you feel yourself falling asleep while driving, stop in a safe place and take a break. Try to avoid driving at times when roads are busiest.

Coping with fatigue at work

You may find that fatigue affects the way you work.

Anyone with cancer is protected by the Equality Act 2010. This means that employers should not treat people with cancer unfairly. It also means that employers are expected to make reasonable adjustments at work to support people with cancer. Reasonable adjustments are changes to your work that your employer can make to allow you to stay at work or return to work. Laws that protect people from discrimination say that your employer must make these changes in certain situations.

If you want to keep working, talk to your manager openly about ways to make your work less tiring. This is part of making reasonable adjustments. Changes could include:

- regular rests or short naps – you may find this useful after an activity or meal
- working from home if possible
- avoiding physical tasks
- planning work around times when you have more energy.

Using a fatigue diary may help you to see what days or times you are most tired. This can help you decide when it is best for you to work or rest.

Explaining the effects of fatigue to your colleagues might also help you to manage your fatigue at work. It may be difficult for some people to understand how tired you are, especially if you look well.

You may find it helpful to talk to the Department for Work and Pensions. They can tell you about benefits that you may be entitled to claim.

For more information about benefits, please see our fact sheet 'Financial support – benefits' at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Caring for someone with fatigue

Many people give support to a family member, partner, friend, or neighbour who has fatigue. Caring for someone with fatigue can mean many things. For example: helping with personal care, providing transport or organising appointments.

If you are caring for someone with fatigue, there are many simple things that you can do to help:

- Acknowledge that fatigue is difficult to cope with.
- Use a fatigue diary to plan. This will help you both to see when the person with fatigue has the energy to do things.
- Try to help the person you care for be more active or make changes to their diet to help them reduce their fatigue.

You can also go to hospital appointments with the person you care for. You could help them explain to the healthcare team how the fatigue is affecting you both. You could also show them the person's fatigue diary and ask their advice about what else you can do to help.

Looking after yourself

When you are caring for someone else it is important to look after yourself too. Make sure you keep up with your own health appointments. This includes any vaccinations you need, such as the flu jab. If you are taking any medicines regularly, it is important you have a supply of these.

If you look after someone, you can ask the adult social services at your local council to look at your needs to see what might help you. This is called a carer's assessment.

The following tips may help:

- Talk to your GP if you are having problems eating or sleeping, are struggling with difficult feelings or are finding it hard to cope.
- Accept help from others or ask for help.
- Make sure you have time off to relax. Do something you enjoy like reading, going for a walk or going for a meal.
- Try to eat healthy food and sit down to eat.
Try to get out of the house every day and do some gentle exercise like walking. This can help you feel less tired and stressed.

You can call our Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00** to find out about support groups in your area. We can try to find out if there is a support group where people speak the same language as you.

Getting the right care and support for you

If you have cancer and do not speak English, you may be worried that this will affect your cancer treatment and care. But your healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs.

We know that sometimes people may face extra challenges in getting the right support. For example, if you work or have a family it can be hard to find time to go to hospital appointments. You might also have worries about money and transport costs. All of this can be stressful and hard to cope with.

We also offer Macmillan Grants to people with cancer. These are one-off payments that can be used for things like hospital parking, travel costs, childcare or heating bills.

Our free support line **0808 808 00 00** can offer advice, in your language, about your situation. You can speak to nurses, financial guides, welfare rights advisers and work support advisers.

How Macmillan can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are here to support you.

Macmillan Support Line

We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. We can help with medical questions, give you information about financial support, or be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. The free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan website

Our website has lots of information in English about cancer. There is also more information in other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

We can also arrange translations just for you. Email us at cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk to tell us what you need.

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. Find your nearest centre at [macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Local support groups

At a support group, you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find out about support groups in your area at [macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Macmillan Online Community

You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community) You can access it at any time of day or night. You can share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts.

More information in your language

We have information in your language about these topics:

Coping with cancer

- Cancer and coronavirus
- Cancer care in the UK
- Claiming benefits when you have cancer
- Eating problems and cancer
- End of life
- Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum
- Healthy eating
- Help with costs when you have cancer
- If you are diagnosed with cancer
- LGBTQ+ people and cancer
- Sepsis and cancer

- Side effects of cancer treatment
- Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

Types of cancer

- Breast cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Large bowel cancer
- Lung cancer
- Prostate cancer

Treatments

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Surgery

To see this information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into this language by a translation company.

The information included is based on our tiredness (fatigue) content available in English on our website.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Professor Tim Iveson, Consultant Medical Oncologist.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk

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