

## **Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer**

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

We hope this fact sheet answers your questions. If you have any more questions, you can ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment. Underlined words are explained in the glossary at the end.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in another language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. Our cancer support specialists can answer medical questions or talk to you about your feelings.

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

### **This information is about:**

- What is fatigue?
- What causes fatigue?
- Managing your fatigue
- Coping with fatigue at home
- Coping with fatigue at work
- Looking after someone with fatigue
- Where to get support
- More information in other languages

## 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 caused by cancer is different from the tiredness that someone without cancer can get. People with cancer may get tired more quickly after activity, and resting or sleeping does not relieve the tiredness.

Fatigue can affect all areas of your life. For some people, fatigue is mild and has little effect on their daily life. For others, it can have greater effect on their life.

Some of the common effects of fatigue are:

- Finding it hard to do everyday activities like showering and cooking
- Having no energy and feeling like you could spend the whole day in bed
- Feeling like you have no strength
- Finding it hard to concentrate, think, speak or make decisions
- Forgetting things
- Feeling breathless after light activity
- Feeling dizzy or light-headed
- Difficulty sleeping
- Loss of sex drive
- Feeling more emotional than usual.

It can be frustrating and overwhelming when you feel tired most of the time. It's 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, such as staying as active as possible. Research tells us that staying active is one of the best things you can do to help your fatigue.

## What causes fatigue?

Fatigue may be caused by:

- the cancer itself
- cancer treatments
- other physical problems caused by the cancer
- the emotional effect of cancer
- travelling to and from the hospital.

Your age and other medical problems can also have an effect.

## Cancer treatments

If fatigue is caused by cancer treatment, it usually gets better after treatment finishes. But it may continue for many months, or sometimes years.

- Surgery – Fatigue after surgery is usually temporary, but depends on the type of surgery.
- Chemotherapy and radiotherapy – Fatigue usually improves 6 to 12 months after treatment ends, but sometimes it can last longer.
- Hormonal therapy and targeted therapy – Some of these therapies can cause fatigue while they are being given.

We have more information in other languages about surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and side effects of cancer treatment. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](http://macmillan.org.uk/translations) or call **0808 808 00 00**.

## Anaemia

Anaemia is caused by not having enough haemoglobin (Hb) in the blood. Haemoglobin is found in red blood cells and carries oxygen around the body, which gives us energy. If you have anaemia, you may feel tired, breathless, dizzy and light-headed.

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. It's important to tell your nurse or doctor if you are having problems eating.

If you are feeling too sick to eat, tell your doctor. They may be able to give you medicine to help.

If you have a reduced appetite or have other problems eating, ask to see a dietitian at the hospital. They can give you advice on what is best to eat.

It might help if someone else can prepare food for you. Or you could buy ready-made meals, or use an organisation that delivers meals to your home.

We have more information in other languages about eating problems. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](http://macmillan.org.uk/translations) or call **0808 808 00 00**.

## Pain

If you have pain, this can cause fatigue. Painkillers and other treatments for pain can help. If your pain is relieved, it can also help your fatigue.

## **Other physical problems caused by the cancer**

Other problems related to the cancer can cause fatigue, for example breathlessness, fluid retention and infection. Treating these problems can often help to relieve fatigue. Tell your doctor or nurse about any other symptoms you have.

## **Other medical problems**

Diabetes, heart problems or thyroid problems may also make fatigue worse. Sometimes, if you are taking medicines for other conditions, these can make you feel tired too.

## **Emotional effects of cancer**

Anxiety, depression, stress and a bad sleeping pattern can all cause fatigue. You may find it helpful to talk about how you feel with your partner, a family member or close friend. Or you may want to talk to your GP. They can refer you to a counsellor for emotional support and prescribe medicines if needed.

## **Managing your fatigue**

This section is about the different things you can do to manage your fatigue. Some of these may help to reduce your fatigue. Others may help you cope with fatigue better.

### **Diet**

Eating well can help increase your energy. You can ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian for advice.

When your appetite is good, take advantage and make sure you eat well. You should 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.

We have more information in other languages about healthy eating. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](http://macmillan.org.uk/translations) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

### **Physical activity and exercise**

Being gently active can help to reduce fatigue. Even just walking around the house can help. For some people, exercises such as yoga, qigong and tai chi may be good.

Do not exercise if you feel unwell, breathless, or if you have pain. Tell your doctor if you feel unwell.

Before you start to do any physical activity or increase the amount you do, it's important to get advice from a healthcare professional. Your cancer specialist or GP can refer you to a physiotherapist. They can help you build up your physical fitness.

## Sleep

Good quality sleep at night is very important if you have fatigue. This can reduce your need to sleep during the day. Here are some tips:

- Wake up and go to bed at the same time every day. Try not to sleep for longer than you need to in the morning.
- Being active and doing regular exercise can help you sleep better.
- Try to make your bedroom a relaxing place. Make sure it's dark, quiet and a comfortable temperature. Earplugs might help.
- Have a warm milky drink before bed. Avoid tea or coffee with caffeine. Try to limit the alcohol you drink in the evening.
- Do things that relax you before bed. You could try having a warm bath or shower, reading, or listening to relaxing music or an audiobook. You could also try relaxation (see below).
- If you are unable to sleep at night, try watching television, reading or listening to an audiobook.
- If you are awake worrying at night, try writing down your worries.
- Steroids can cause sleep problems. If you are taking steroids, ask your doctor if you can take them earlier in the day.

## Relaxation

Stress uses up energy and can make you feel more tired. Try to make time to relax. You could:

- talk to someone about what is worrying you
- try a relaxation technique for 5 to 15 minutes each day. Your doctor or nurse can help you find the best technique for you.
- try a complementary therapy (see below).

## Complementary therapies

There are other therapies that could help you cope with fatigue. These include:

- meditation
- acupuncture
- reflexology
- aromatherapy
- massage
- music therapy.

You may need to pay for these but they are sometimes available on the NHS. Ask your GP or nurse if you are interested in trying any of these. It's important to be safe and use a qualified therapist. You can find a qualified therapist in your area on the British Complementary Medicine Association website ([bcma.co.uk](http://bcma.co.uk)). Or, contact them on [office@bcma.co.uk](mailto:office@bcma.co.uk) or **0845 345 5977**.

## **Counselling**

Fatigue can be difficult to cope with. Sometimes it can make you feel anxious and depressed. If you find it hard to talk about your emotions with people close to you, or if that doesn't help, you may find counselling helpful. Counsellors are trained to help you talk through your feelings and find ways of dealing with them.

Your cancer specialist or GP can refer you to a counsellor. Not all counselling services are available on the NHS, so you may need to pay for them.

## **Support groups**

Some people find it helps to talk to other people who have had fatigue. Most areas in the UK have support groups. They are sometimes led by a healthcare professional. 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 try to find out if there is a support group where people speak the same language as you. Or you can visit our website [macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups](http://macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups)

## **Spiritual support**

Some people find comfort in religion during difficult times. You may find it helpful to talk to a chaplain, minister, priest, rabbi or other religious leader. They are used to supporting people in times of need, even if you don't have a particular faith.

## **Hospital appointments**

Prepare for your next appointment at the hospital by writing down any questions that you want to ask about fatigue.

If you find it hard to speak or understand English, ask for an interpreter before the appointment. If there is anything you do not understand at the appointment, ask the doctor or nurse to explain again.

It is important to describe your fatigue to your healthcare team. You may need to explain how your fatigue is affecting your life. Your doctor will look for any causes of your fatigue that can be treated.

You may find it helpful to ask these questions:

- What could be causing my fatigue?
- What treatments may help?
- How can I cope with my fatigue?
- What help is available?
- What can I do to reduce my fatigue?

It may help to take a relative or friend with you to appointments, to help you remember what was said. They could also write down what you need to remember.

### **Drug treatments for fatigue**

There are not any licensed drug treatments to prevent or improve fatigue. However, steroid drugs, such as dexamethasone can sometimes help. Your cancer specialist can tell you whether this may be helpful in your situation.

### **Coping with fatigue at home**

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

- Use a diary to help you 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.
- Try to plan enough time to rest after a period of activity.
- Make sure you look after your own needs and get enough rest, even if you have others to think about.
- Try not to have too much rest at one time as your muscles can weaken and make your fatigue worse. It's also important that any daytime rest does not stop you from sleeping at night.

If you find that you tire yourself by doing too much this will not make your cancer any worse but try to rest properly afterwards.

If you have friends or relatives nearby, you may want to ask for help. It can sometimes be difficult to ask for help, but friends, relatives or neighbours are often are pleased to help with everyday tasks.

If you are struggling with fatigue, tell your cancer doctor, nurse or GP. Below are some ideas to help you deal with fatigue at home.

### **Managing everyday activities**

- Spread tasks out over the week.
- Do a little bit each day, rather than doing a lot at one time.
- Sit down rather than standing when doing chores.
- Avoid stretching and bending when cleaning. Using mops and brooms with long handles can help.
- Ask someone to take your rubbish bags out for you.
- If you have a garden, ask someone to look after it for you.

## **Shopping**

If there is someone who can do your shopping for you, this can be helpful. If not, these suggestions may help:

- Make a list before you go, following the layout of the store.
- Use a shopping trolley rather than a basket.
- Shop at less busy times.
- Shop with friend for extra help.
- Ask staff to help you with packing and carrying shopping to the car.
- Do your shopping online and have it delivered.

## **Cooking**

- Try cooking meals that take less time.
- Sit down while preparing meals, for example while chopping.
- When you're feeling less tired, prepare extra dishes or double portions to freeze for when you need them.
- Use oven dishes you can serve from to reduce washing up.
- Let dishes soak rather than scrubbing them.
- Eat convenience or ready-made meals when you are too tired to cook.

## **Washing and dressing**

- Have a bath rather than a shower, or sit down in the shower.
- Wear clothes that are easy to put on and take off. Wearing pyjamas can be easier if you are not going out.
- Sit down when you get dressed.

## **Leisure**

- If you feel too tired to read, listen to audiobooks.
- Listen to the radio rather than watching the TV.
- You may find short visits from friends or relatives better. Let them know if there are times when you cannot see them.

## **Laundry**

- If you have one, use a trolley to move your washing to and from the washing machine.
- If you can, get help to hang up the washing.
- Sit down to iron or fold clothes.
- Wear clothes that don't need to be ironed.



## **Children**

If you have children it can be upsetting if you can't do as much with them as you would normally. Here are some ideas that might help:

- Explain to your children that you feel tired and can't do as much with them as before.
- Plan activities with your children that you can do sitting down.
- Visit places where you can sit while the children enjoy themselves.
- Use a pushchair where possible, rather than carrying children.
- Try to involve your children in helping you with chores.
- Accept offers of help from people you trust. They could take your children to or from school, or babysit for you.

## **Driving**

Driving can be difficult if you feel very tired. It can also be dangerous as you may not be able to concentrate. It's important to be aware of how much your fatigue is affecting you before you drive. Don't drive if you feel very tired.

Here are some other tips that might help:

- If you feel too tired to drive, ask a family member or friend to drive if possible.
- If you have a hospital appointment, ask the nurse or doctor if there is any help available so that you do not have to drive.
- If you have to drive, plan any trips for when you know you usually feel more alert.
- Try to drive at times when the roads are less busy.
- If you feel yourself becoming tired while driving, stop in a safe place and have a break.
- If you have to make a long journey, break it up with regular stops or an overnight stay somewhere.

## **Coping with fatigue at work**

You may find that you have to stop working or cut down the hours you work. It can help to talk to your employer, personnel or human resources (HR) department. Let them know what is happening and that you may need some time off. There are also things that can be done to make your work less tiring.

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.

Things that your employer can do to help include:

- Changing your hours so that you can travel to and from work at less busy times.
- Asking colleagues to be supportive and to help with some of your work.
- Finding you a parking place near to your place of work.
- Letting you take breaks to lie down or rest.
- Allowing you to work from home if possible.
- Finding you lighter work if your job involves physical activity or heavy lifting.

If you are self-employed, it can help to visit [gov.uk](http://gov.uk) to see what financial help you may be able to get. We have more information in other languages about claiming benefits. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](http://macmillan.org.uk/translations) or call us.

You can call Macmillan on **0808 808 00 00** for more information. We have experts who can talk to you about work and finances. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language.

## Looking after someone who has fatigue

Caring for another person can be exhausting. It's important to look after yourself and avoid getting too tired yourself. You may need to ask other people or organisations to help with the caring. If you need support, call Macmillan on 0808 808 00 00. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language.

If you are caring for someone with fatigue, it can help to:

- Encourage your relative or friend to use a diary to record when they feel good and when they feel most tired. You could help them with this.
- Use the diary to find the best times of day to do things such as shopping or having visitors.
- Try reducing your relative or friend's fatigue by helping them make simple improvements to their sleep and diet. You could encourage them to do some gentle exercise (see pages ##).
- Go with your relative or friend to hospital appointments and take the diary with you.
- Talk to the doctors and nurses about what might be causing the fatigue and what might help.

## Where to get support

There are many people who can help you and your family:

- **Macmillan Cancer Support** – You can call Macmillan on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. Our cancer support specialists can talk to you about fatigue and what might help. They can also help you talk about your emotions and tell you about benefits you could be entitled to. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.
- **District nurses** work closely with GPs. They can visit you at home.
- **Hospital social workers** can arrange for you to get help with practical things like cooking and personal care. They can also arrange help for someone who is looking after you.
- **Palliative care nurses** are experts in treating symptoms. They are sometimes called Macmillan nurses.
- **Marie Curie nurses** care for people approaching the end of their lives at home. Your GP can refer you to one.
- **Counsellors** are trained to listen. They can help you talk about your feelings and find ways to cope with them. Your hospital doctor or GP can refer you for counselling.

## Glossary

**Acupuncture** – A complementary therapy that uses fine needles that are inserted into the skin.

**Aromatherapy** – A complementary therapy that uses plant oils. The oils are thought to help your body and mind.

**Breathlessness** – Finding it hard to breathe or breathing quickly.

**Chemotherapy** – A treatment for cancer where drugs are given to destroy cancer cells.

**Complementary therapies** – A range of different therapies that can help you feel better. They can sometimes be used alongside your cancer treatment. They may help relieve some of the effects of cancer or its treatment. You should always speak to your doctor before using these therapies.

**Diabetes** – A condition where the amount of sugar in the blood is too high because the body cannot use it properly.

**Dietitian** - An expert in food and nutrition. They can tell you which foods are best for you.

**Fluid retention** – A build-up of fluid in the body that causes swelling.

**Hormonal therapy** – Treatment that affects certain hormones in the body. This can slow down or stop the cancer growing.

**Infection** - When a bacteria or virus enters the body.

**Massage** – A complementary therapy that uses touch and gentle pressure to relieve tension. The area where the cancer is should not be massaged.

**Meditation** – A technique used to deeply relax and calm the mind.

**Music therapy** – A therapy that uses music to help you express your feelings.

**Physiotherapist** – A healthcare professional trained to treat people using physical methods, such as working with joints and muscles, massage and heat treatment.

**Qigong** – A type of exercise that uses body posture, movement, breathing and meditation.

**Radiotherapy** - A treatment that uses high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells.

**Reflexology** – A therapy that uses a type of foot or hand **massage**.

**Relaxation techniques** – Exercises that can help you relax, for example deep breathing or **meditation**.

**Surgery** – A way of treating cancer by removing all or part of the cancer. This is also known as having an operation.

**Tai chi** – A type of exercise that combines deep breathing and relaxation with slow movements.

**Targeted therapy** – A cancer treatment using drugs that interfere with the way that cancer cells grow. Also called biological therapy.

**Thyroid** – A gland in the neck that releases hormones into the blood.

**Yoga** – A type of exercise using gentle stretching, deep breathing and movement.

## More information in other languages

We have information in other languages about these topics:

### Types of cancer

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

### Treatments

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Surgery

### Coping with cancer

- Claiming benefits
- Eating problems and cancer
- End of life
- Fatigue and cancer
- Side effects of cancer treatment
- What you can do to help yourself

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

### Speak to us in another language

You can call Macmillan free on **0808 808 00 00** and speak to us in your own language through an interpreter. You can talk to us about your worries and medical questions. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. If you have problems hearing you can use textphone **0808 808 0121** or Text Relay.

## References and thanks

All of this information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team.

The information in this fact sheet is based on the Macmillan booklet **Coping with fatigue**. We can send you a copy, but the full booklet is only available in English.

This content has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by our medical editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Consultant Medical Oncologist and Macmillan Chief Medical Editor.

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All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **[bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk)**

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