

## Fatigue

### Fact sheet

#### Fatigue in advanced disease

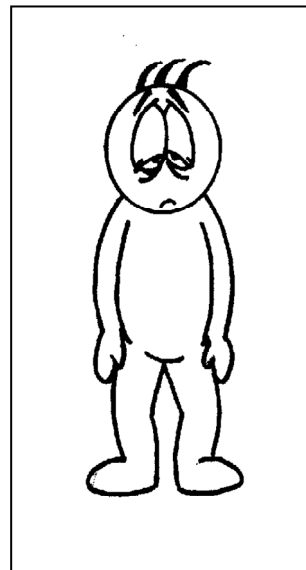
Fatigue is an overwhelming feeling where normal activity becomes an effort of the mind as well as the body. The fatigue you experience in advanced illness is not the same as the experience of fatigue when you are well.

It is often hard to describe to others what fatigue feels like. Some words used are drowsiness, tiredness, lethargy, exhaustion, inertia, and weakness. Fatigue also includes feelings of being unable to be interested in anything, lack of motivation, irritability, frustration, and loss of concentration.

Unlike normal tiredness or drowsiness fatigue in advanced illness is not necessarily brought on by activity, and is not relieved by sleep. You can wake up feeling tired no matter how much sleep you have.

You may experience fatigue as a general tiredness or it can be an overwhelming exhaustion.

Even the littlest thing can feel as though it takes too much effort.



Many people say fatigue is more distressing and disabling than any other symptom.

It is often associated with a lack of appetite and interest in food, and involuntary weight loss.

Changes in the way you look can be as upsetting as the way you feel.

Other people can find it difficult to understand your experience of fatigue. Your family and carers might feel that you have given up, when in reality it is something you can't control.

#### What causes fatigue?

Fatigue is often caused by a combination of factors.

Advanced disease is the most common cause of fatigue. Severe heart and lung disease, kidney and liver disease, as well as cancer and its treatments are also associated with fatigue.

Recent research shows that your internal repair system – the immune system – produces chemicals called cytokines as it tries to heal the body. An excess or over production of cytokines can affect your body's internal balance, resulting in loss of appetite, loss of muscle bulk, reduced energy levels and stamina, reduced muscle strength and irreversible weight loss.

The body uses a lot of energy fighting disease and coping with the effects of disease and disease treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

### **What can be done about fatigue?**

Talk with your doctor about your fatigue.

Everyone is different and there are some conditions where specific treatments may be useful. These include:

- Disturbed sleep;
- Poorly controlled pain or nausea;
- Anxiety or depression;
- The side effects of medicines, painkillers, antidepressants and sedatives;
- Anaemia or a mineral imbalance; or
- Persistent infection.

Generally a detailed history and examination will uncover these causes, but occasionally some blood tests may be necessary.

### **What can I do to manage fatigue?**

Once your doctor has ruled out any reversible causes, there are changes you can make to your day to day life which will help you conserve energy and maintain independence.

Practical strategies include:

- Plan your important activities for the times of day when your energy is highest;
- Rest before and after activities;
- Focus on priorities – these may be things you really enjoy doing, 'must be done'

jobs, or long held goals;

- Delegate tasks to preserve energy for what is important;
- Break large tasks into smaller goals;
- Look for different and less taxing ways to do familiar things; and
- Arrange assistance for the tasks you can no longer do.

It is important to realise that too much rest can lead to muscle weakness and can in fact make fatigue worse.

Regular gentle repetitive activity will help you to reduce feelings of fatigue, give a feeling of well being, and help to keep muscles and bones strong. Walking, swimming, water aerobics, resistance (weight) training done regularly are often of benefit.

The greatest hurdle to overcome is the mental fatigue that comes in just considering exercise.

### **Are there medications to help?**

In certain circumstances there are medications which may give a short term boost to energy levels, however results are variable, and there are side effects which need to be considered.

The medications can be useful to give you energy for a special occasion - you will need to discuss this with your doctor or palliative care nurse.

### **Carer fatigue**

Families and carers of palliative care patients often become fatigued through the physical, mental and emotional load of caring.

This constant load can lead to the carer experiencing tiredness or exhaustion leading to irritability, frustration, and lack of concentration. Often not understanding what is happening to the person they are caring for is a big stress as well.

It is important that family member and carers make sure that they themselves eat well and get

regular exercise; and that they have adequate support, rest and respite so that they can continue to care.

Attention to these things can make a big difference to the experience of caring.

## **Working with your health care team**

Don't suffer in silence - your health care team can help you.

- Your **doctor** can identify, treat or manage reversible causes.
- Your **nurse** can help you with practical strategies and decision making, and link you with support services.
- **Occupational therapists** in particular have expertise in different approaches to every day tasks, showing you how to do things more easily and safely, and providing equipment to reduce effort.
- **Physiotherapists** can help with appropriate gentle exercises.
- **Social workers** can support you and your family and carers with the emotional impact of fatigue.
- **Volunteers** may be able to help with tasks you don't want to waste energy on, and provide respite and support for your family and carers.

## **Related Fact Sheets**

Nil

### **CONTACT DETAILS**

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