
Nutrition and Cancer-Related Fatigue

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is usually described as lacking energy and feeling weak, exhausted or tired.

General fatigue with cancer can be caused by several things, including:

- The cancer itself.
- Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, bone marrow transplant or surgery.
- Side effects of treatment such as anemia, nausea, vomiting, pain, insomnia or mood changes.
- Emotions such as anxiety or depression.
- Medications, particularly pain relievers.
- Poor or inadequate nutrition.
- Lack of movement.

Why should you tell us about your fatigue?

We can help! Some causes of fatigue may be improved by lifestyle changes, diet changes and/or medical interventions.

Decreasing Fatigue Through a Healthy Diet

When a person has cancer, changes can occur in the body that may alter your body's need for, and ability to process nutrients. This may lead to poor nutrition which can result in fatigue. Simple improvements in your diet may be helpful to combat fatigue!

Nutrition Tips for Decreasing Fatigue

- Eat 4 to 6 small meals per day. Your body gets energy through food so eating every few hours provides your body with consistent energy throughout the day.
- Eat foods that are easy to chew. Foods that are hard to chew take more effort to eat and could cause more fatigue.
- Include high protein foods at every meal to help improve immunity and keep your muscles strong.
 - Eggs, meat, beans, milk and dairy products, soy, and peanut butter

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- Eat iron-rich foods, especially if you are anemic.
 - Egg yolks, lean meats, liver, whole grain breads and fortified breakfast cereals
 - Eat vitamin C-rich foods to help your body absorb iron.
 - Citrus fruits, bananas, avocados, peaches, melons, strawberries, tomatoes and broccoli
 - Drink plenty of fluid (especially water) throughout the day to avoid dehydration. Dehydration can also cause fatigue.
 - Enjoy foods that contain fluid or that melt at room temperature such as soup, frozen ice pops, popsicles, flavored ices, and gelatins.

Meal Preparation Tips for Decreasing Fatigue

- Eat canned, frozen or other prepared convenience foods.
- Take advantage of the microwave to cook or re-heat prepared foods.
- When feeling well, prepare extra portions and freeze in smaller containers to eat later.
- Use curbside grocery store-pick or grocery delivery options if available.
- Ask health care professionals about community resources that deliver prepared meals.
- Allow family and friends to help with meal preparation or bring meals and snack foods to you.
- Keep easy-to-grab snacks on hand including yogurt, granola bars, nuts, peanut butter and crackers, fruit, cheese sticks, or dried fruit.

Other Ways to Decrease Fatigue

- Make time for rest and take short naps when needed.
- Don't stay up too late; try to keep a good bedtime and morning wake-up routine.
- Avoid screen time 1-2 hours before bed (i.e. television, cellphone, computer games or video games).
- Avoid drinking caffeine in the afternoon, which can interfere with good night's sleep.
- Avoid excessive alcohol, which may interfere with sleep and interact with medical treatments.
- Keep engaged in social and productive activities such as hobbies or volunteering in other interests that you enjoy. The more active you are, the more energy you may have.

For any additional nutrition questions, please contact your VA dietitian.