



## Occupational therapy and cancer-related fatigue

### What is fatigue?

*Cancer related fatigue leads to a decreased capacity to maintain physical performance, causes impaired mental functioning such as loss of concentration and memory. Contrary to normal tiredness it is not relieved by sufficient sleep or rest (Munch et al 2006).*

As many as three quarters (75%) of people with cancer feel fatigued at some time. Cancer-related fatigue may be due to the cancer itself or may be a result of symptoms caused by the cancer. It can also be a side effect of treatment.

Education and understanding of cancer related fatigue is proven to help patients cope better.

### Coping strategies

#### Planning:

- plan your day to incorporate regular rest breaks
- certain times of day may be better for you
- 7 day diaries – can help you assess where you are using your energy

#### Prioritising:

- do - what do you need to do?
- desire - what would you like to do?
- delegate - can you ask someone else to do it?
- delay / ditch - can you put it off or not do it at all?

#### Pacing:

- take regular breaks
- don't do too much at once
- pace yourself – don't rush
- sit down to save energy

#### Labour saving techniques:

- shopping on the internet
- keep heavy pans close to the stove
- sit down to iron / chop vegetables / do chores
- use a rucksack / trolley to move your washing to and from the machine

### Sleep management

Sleep quality affects quality of life and wellbeing

#### Before bed:

- avoid alcohol for a few hours before bedtime
- avoid nicotine for a few hours before bedtime
- do not exercise within a few hours of bedtime
- reduce caffeine
- do not have a heavy meal before bedtime (a light snack can be helpful)
- body rhythms – if you keep to a pattern you are more likely to sleep well

- if you need a nap in the day, try to keep it to less than an hour
- if you are very fatigued try not to leave it too late before you get ready for bed
- try to get up at the same time every day, resist the temptation to 'lie-in'

**The environment:**

- should be quiet and relaxing
- should not be too hot, cold or noisy
- earplugs and eyeshades may be useful
- make sure the room is dark with good curtains to stop early morning sunlight
- hide your alarm under your bed, 'clock-watching' does not help

**Mood and atmosphere:**

- try to relax and 'wind down' before going to bed
- try not to do anything mentally demanding within 90 minutes of going to bed, such as studying
- some people find that playing soft music is helpful at bedtime, try a player with a sleep button that turns the music off after about 30 minutes

If you can't get to sleep after 20-30 minutes, then get up. Go into another room and do something else such as reading or watching TV. You can repeat this as often as necessary until you fall asleep.

**Nutrition**

Good nutrition before, during and after treatment is key to managing fatigue. Maintaining maximum nutritional status can reduce or prevent some of the fatigue associated with cancer or its treatment.

**Maximising nutritional status:**

- provides building blocks for growth and repair
- helps maintain muscle mass
- helps maintain energy levels

**Reduces:**

- fatigue
- lethargy
- pressure sores

**Improves:**

- mood
- immunity
- functional capacity
- muscle weakness
- energy levels
- growth and repair within the body

Regular carbohydrate-based meals or snacks (preferably wholemeal) take longer to break down, so the energy is released slowly.

**Remember the EAT WELL plate!**

**Practical issues:**

- cook food in batches and freeze portion size meals
- prepare in the morning (planning and pacing)
- ask for help from friends /family
- frozen foods / meals

## **Exercise**

### **Effect of inactivity:**

- muscular weakness
- muscular imbalance
- reduced range of movement
- reduced stamina

### **Benefits of exercise:**

- mobility
- aids sleep
- improves mood
- improves immunity
- reduces the severity of fatigue
- reduces anxiety and helps in the management of depression

### **Contra-indications to exercise:**

- infection / fever
- limitations within disease
- lymphoedema (increased blood flow – necessary to wear garments)
- post treatment related conditions

### **Side effects of current treatment:**

- 72 hours after chemotherapy may experience intense fatigue
- fatigue peaks 7-10 days after completion of radiotherapy
- be careful of overheating
- some exercise is not appropriate e.g. swimming
- if it takes longer than 30 minutes to recover then you've done too much!

### **It needs to be enjoyable!**

### **Safe, general advice:**

- start activities gently and increase slowly
- simple aerobic exercise such as walking
- regularly!
- remember energy management graph!
- water and small carbohydrate snack after exercises
- 30 minute recovery rule!

Cochrane Report (2008) 'Provides evidence that exercise is beneficial in the management of cancer-related fatigue. Statistically significant improvements in fatigue were identified following an exercise programme either during or after cancer therapy'.

### **Who can help with what?**

#### **Occupational therapy**

- maintaining independence
- fatigue management
- equipment advice
- sleep management
- advice on personal care
- relaxation techniques

## Physiotherapy

- exercise – benefits
- contraindications
- disease specific
- any other physical difficulties

## Dietitian

- dietary advice
- trouble swallowing solid food
- lost your appetite

## Consultant and nursing staff

- questions concerning medication / treatment / side effects

Local hospices often run fatigue management groups and may provide complementary therapies.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

We try to ensure that all our information given to patients is accurate, balanced and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact [patient.information@christie.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.information@christie.nhs.uk)

For more information about The Christie and our services, please visit [www.christie.nhs.uk](http://www.christie.nhs.uk) or visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford.

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