

# Understanding Lymphoma and Cancer-related Fatigue

**When healthy individuals experience fatigue, it can be relieved by sleep and rest. Cancer-related fatigue is a daily lack of energy or strength and unusual or excessive whole-body exhaustion that, unlike tiredness, is not the result of activity or exertion and cannot be relieved by rest or sleep.**

Cancer-related fatigue is the most common symptom experienced by cancer patients. Most patients consider fatigue to be one of their most distressing symptoms, which can often disrupt a patient's normal routine and even cause changes in their work status. Historically, cancer-related fatigue was underreported, underdiagnosed, and undertreated; however, a renewed focus by the healthcare community is helping to address this lapse.

One of the challenges in managing cancer-related fatigue is being able to distinguish it from other issues such as depression. Cancer-related fatigue often occurs with other symptoms, such as pain or distress, and is known to occur with depression in cancer patients. There are many factors, including the disease, treatments, medications, pain, nutritional deficits, metabolic changes, stress, insomnia, anxiety, and depression, that can cause cancer-related fatigue. Cancer treatment such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, stem cell transplantation, and biologic therapy are often associated with fatigue. Anemia (a decrease in red blood cells, which carry oxygen throughout the body) can result from either a patient's lymphoma or the cancer treatments used to treat it and can also lead to fatigue. With decreased oxygen levels, it becomes more difficult for the body to sustain its normal activity levels.

Managing fatigue is an important part of the total health care of individual patients; therefore, patients are usually assessed for fatigue at diagnosis and throughout the course of their disease management. Cancer-related fatigue can last long after treatment is complete.

## SYMPTOMS OF FATIGUE

- Extreme weariness and/or overall lack of energy
- Muscle weakness, especially in the arms and legs; difficulty climbing stairs or walking short distances
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty performing simple tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, making the bed, or taking a shower)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Moodiness, frustration, and/or irritability
- Waking up tired after a full night's sleep

It is important that patients inform their physician about their fatigue, so it can be evaluated. Although not all causes of cancer-related fatigue are well understood, the patient's physician may want to perform tests to try to determine what

might be causing the fatigue. Patients should be as specific as possible about their level of fatigue and when it occurs (such as in the morning, after treatment, etc.), as well as the activities that cause the most difficulty. As with other aspects of cancer and its treatment, fatigue varies from person to person.

Fatigue can have an extremely negative impact on one's quality of life. The severity of fatigue and how long it lasts depends on many factors including the type and length of cancer treatment and a patient's overall health status. Many patients and physicians do not discuss fatigue because they believe nothing can be done about it. Although fatigue may not be completely preventable, the following tips may help patients manage or minimize this troublesome symptom.



## PATIENT TIPS FOR MANAGING FATIGUE

- Keep a diary to help identify which times of the day or times related to treatment cycles you have the most energy. Document which activities make you feel fatigued or energized. This information can help you plan your activities around the times you have the most energy and will also help you communicate with your physician.
- Delegate. Ask family or friends for assistance with your most energy-draining activities or chores that must be done during your lowest energy times. Often, family members or friends are happy to help with chores and other everyday tasks.
- Make sure you schedule appropriate time to rest between your daily activities. Prioritize tasks so your energy is used to accomplish your most important tasks or those that cannot be delegated.
- Organize your surroundings. Keep the items you need most frequently in an easily accessible location.
- Consider if you are experiencing any specific symptoms that may be related to fatigue. Treating or managing symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, pain, fever, or lingering depression can help increase your energy supply.
- Avoid food and drinks that may not provide you with sustainable energy. For example, drinking too much caffeine can cause fatigue.
- Try to identify any causes of stress. Speak with a professional counselor to help you cope with the stress of your illness and incorporate relaxation or other stress-relieving techniques into your routine.
- Exercise if your physician recommends it. An expert on your healthcare team can help you develop a personalized exercise plan. While it may seem counterintuitive to exercise, activity helps the body to release hormones that can increase your energy. Additionally, exercise during the day can help improve your quality of sleep at night.
- Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, and drink at least eight glasses of water each day. Review your diet with your physician or a nutrition counselor. Treatment and recovery often put extra demands on your body for calories, nutrition, and fluids.
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule. If you are having trouble sleeping, consult your health care team about possible solutions. In addition, napping can be a quick refresher, but avoid spending too much time in bed. Also be aware that some sleep aids can often cause tiredness in the morning.



## TREATMENT FOR FATIGUE

If tests determine that a patient's fatigue is caused by anemia, low thyroid hormone levels, low vitamin B12 or iron levels, or low testosterone (in males) for example, a physician may prescribe treatments for these conditions that will also relieve their fatigue. A physician may recommend additional testing such as a sleep study to evaluate for sleep apnea, which can be treated with the use of breathing machines while sleeping. If a patient has depression or anxiety, treatment of these conditions may relieve excessive fatigue. For patients with advanced disease or those receiving cancer treatments, psychostimulants such as methylphenidate or wakefulness agents such as modafinil may help. However, these drugs do not seem to work well in patients who are disease free and not receiving cancer treatments.

Treatment options can incorporate complementary therapies as well. In addition to previously mentioned recommendations, including a balanced diet and physical activity, other options such as acupuncture may help to relieve fatigue. For more information, please view the *Integrative Oncology* fact sheet on the Lymphoma Research Foundation's (LRF's) website at [lymphoma.org/publications](http://lymphoma.org/publications).



## LRF'S HELPLINE AND LYMPHOMA SUPPORT NETWORK

A lymphoma diagnosis often triggers a range of feelings and concerns. In addition, cancer treatment can cause physical discomfort. The LRF Helpline staff members are available to answer your general questions about a lymphoma diagnosis and treatment information, as well as provide individual support and referrals to you and your loved ones. Callers may request the services of a language interpreter. A part of the Helpline is LRF's one-to-one peer support program Lymphoma Support Network. This program connects patients and caregivers with volunteers who have experience with lymphomas, similar treatments, or challenges, for mutual emotional support and encouragement. You may find this useful whether you or a loved one is newly diagnosed, in treatment, or in remission.



## LRF FOCUS ON LYMPHOMA MOBILE APP

Focus on Lymphoma is the first app to provide patients and their caregivers with tailored content based on lymphoma subtype, and actionable tools to better manage diagnosis and treatment. Comprehensive lymphoma management, conveniently in one secure and easy-to-navigate app, no matter where you are on the care continuum. Get the right information, first, with resources from the entire Lymphoma Research Foundation content library, use unique tracking and reminder tools, and connect with a community of specialists and patients. To learn more this resource, visit our website at [lymphoma.org/mobileapp](http://lymphoma.org/mobileapp), or contact the LRF Helpline at 800-500-9976 or [helpline@lymphoma.org](mailto:helpline@lymphoma.org)

### Resources

LRF offers a wide range of resources that address treatment options, the latest research advances, and ways to cope with all aspects of lymphoma and CLL/SLL including our award-winning mobile app. LRF also provides many educational activities, including our in-person meetings, webinars for people with lymphoma, as well as patient guides and e-Updates that provide the latest disease-specific news and treatment options. To learn more about any of these resources, visit our website at [www.lymphoma.org](http://www.lymphoma.org) or contact the Helpline at (800) 500-9976 or [helpline@lymphoma.org](mailto:helpline@lymphoma.org).

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Supported through grants from:



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Last updated 2022

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