

# Coping with fatigue related to cancer and treatments



When you're having cancer treatments, you may feel more tired than usual. Here is some advice on coping with fatigue.

## What's different about this kind of fatigue?

Fatigue related to cancer and cancer treatments is different from fatigue that's due to lack of sleep or intense activity.

- It lasts for some time.
- You still feel tired even after having a rest.
- This kind of fatigue occurs whether you've been active or not.
- It can affect your everyday activities.

## What causes this kind of fatigue?

Fatigue may be caused by:

- the cancer itself
- treatments (surgery, chemo or radiation)
- not drinking enough liquids
- poor eating habits
- lack of physical activity
- pain or discomfort
- not getting enough sleep or having insomnia
- anxiety and stress
- hormonal imbalances

**Fatigue is the most common symptom when someone has cancer. It's also the most common side effect of treatments.**

## When can I expect to start feeling tired?

You may start feeling more tired from the time when you first have cancer. Treatment-related fatigue may appear early on or gradually, depending on the type of treatment you're having. It may also grow worse as you proceed with your treatments.

The fatigue may continue throughout your treatments. In some cases, it may also continue for several months after treatments are completed.



Intravenous chemotherapy.

**Of every 10 patients treated for cancer, 7 to 10 will experience fatigue.**

## What symptoms could I have?

- a continuous and unpleasant sensation of being exhausted, weak, and tired
- feeling like you just can't do this
- a serious lack of energy
- feeling mentally and emotionally exhausted
- finding it difficult to concentrate and to remember certain things
- feeling exhausted from the time you get up in the morning - a feeling that doesn't disappear even after you rest
- having trouble with everyday activities: getting dressed, washing, doing the dishes, etc.
- a feeling of heaviness in your legs and arms
- feeling sad, frustrated, or irritable
- being less interested in the things you usually enjoy

## What's the best way to fight fatigue?

It's perfectly normal to feel tired if you have cancer and you're getting cancer treatments. But fatigue can really affect your everyday activities.

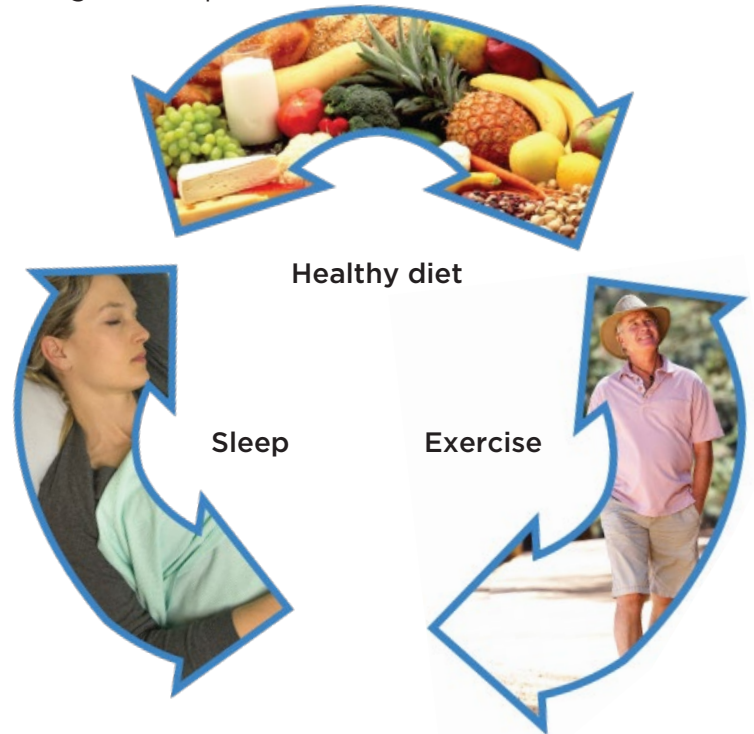
It is possible to reduce the effects of fatigue. Changing some of your lifestyle habits can make a big difference.



Eating a healthy diet and continuing to do light activities can help you feel less tired.

## 1 KEEP MOVING, EAT WELL AND SLEEP WELL

There are three factors that play a key role in reducing fatigue. Make sure you balance exercise, eating well and getting a good night's sleep.



### > Exercise

Physical activity can reduce fatigue and give you more energy. It can also help reduce other symptoms, such as constipation, insomnia and anxiety.

Here are some examples of activities:

- Take a walk or a bike ride.
- Do some light housework.
- Do some stretching, yoga, tai chi or reiki.
- Do any other activities that you enjoy.

Ask for a copy of the CHUM information sheet on [Staying active during cancer treatments.](#)



### IMPORTANT

Choose a form of exercise that you feel comfortable doing. If it's been a while since you've been physically active, take it slowly - bit by bit.

## > Healthy diet

It's important to eat well, as food is what gives you energy. It's like filling the tank of your car.

- Eat 3 meals and 2 or 3 snacks every day.
- Make protein part of every meal and snack: cheese, nuts, fish, meat, eggs, poultry, milk, Greek yogurt, etc.
- Choose carbohydrates that are slowly absorbed by the body (complex carbohydrates). For example, vegetables and fruit, whole-grain cereals, milk and dairy substitutes, and legumes. They'll give you energy all day long.
- Drink 8 to 10 glasses of liquid every day.



Ask for a copy of our [Eating protein-rich, energy-dense foods](#) fact sheet.

## > Sleep

Some tips on healthy sleep habits:

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Avoid caffeinated drinks after noon (coffee, tea, cola, etc.).
- As needed, take short naps (15-45 minutes) in the late morning or early afternoon.
- Use your bed only for sleeping or sex. Don't eat, read or watch TV in bed.
- Don't go to bed with a very full stomach.

## 2 PACE YOURSELF FOR ENERGY

Here's how:

- Alternate active and rest periods.
- Sit down instead of standing for some activities (drying dishes, for example).
- Let dishes soak before you wash them, and leave them to air-dry.
- Eat prepared meals (meals on wheels, catering services, frozen foods).
- Cook on days when you have more energy and freeze individual portions.
- Have your groceries delivered.
- Evaluate your level of fatigue regularly. Make sure you're not going beyond your limits.
- Divide tasks into steps and rest between steps. For example, cut vegetables for dinner in advance, then rest before you do the cooking.
- Ask for help.
- Eliminate or reduce less important activities.



## 3 REDUCE STRESS AND ANXIETY

Here are some effective methods:

- Practice calming activities (listening to music, seeing friends, reading, etc.).
- Try various relaxation techniques (visualization, deep breathing, etc.).
- Get a massage or soak your feet in warm or hot salt water.
- Meditate.
- Contact a support group.
- Talk to your nurse. She can refer you to another member of the care team, such as a psychologist, if necessary.



## Who should I ask for help or answers to my questions?

If you're still feeling very tired after following all these tips, talk to your doctor.

For other questions, feel free to contact a member of your care team.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Nutrition:

> [nourishonline.ca](http://nourishonline.ca)

Coping with fatigue:

Canadian Cancer Society:

> [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

→ Cancer information → Diagnosis and treatment → Managing side effects → Fatigue

Support groups:

> **1 888-939-3333**

> [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

Quebec Cancer Foundation:

> [fqc.qc.ca](http://fqc.qc.ca)

Listening, sharing, activities:

Virage Foundation (at the CHUM)

> [viragecancer.org](http://viragecancer.org) (in French)

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site

[chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)



## NOTEPAD



### Questions




### Resource people and contacts


*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)

