

Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

This information is about fatigue. Fatigue means feeling very tired. It can be caused by cancer or cancer treatments.

Any words that are underlined are explained in the word list at the end. The word list also includes the pronunciation of the words in English.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on freephone **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need (say “xxxxx”).

There is more cancer information in [language] at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

This information is about:

- What is fatigue?
- What causes fatigue?
- Ways to manage fatigue
- Coping with fatigue at work
- Caring for someone with fatigue
- How Macmillan can help you
- Word list
- More information in [language]
- References and thanks

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is when you feel very tired most or all of the time. It is a common problem for people with cancer.

Fatigue caused by cancer is different from the tiredness that someone without cancer can get. People with cancer may get tired more quickly after activity and resting or sleeping does not relieve the tiredness.

For most people, fatigue gets better after treatment finishes. But for some it may continue for months or even years. Everyone is different and there is no way to know how long fatigue may last for each person.

Fatigue can affect you in different ways. Some of the common effects of fatigue are:

- difficulty doing simple things, such as brushing your hair or getting dressed
- feeling you have no energy or strength
- difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- difficulty thinking, speaking or making decisions
- feeling breathless after light activity
- feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- difficulty sleeping (insomnia)
- losing interest in sex
- feeling more emotional than usual.

It can be frustrating and overwhelming when you feel tired most of the time. It is important to tell your doctors and nurses about how it makes you feel. There are ways they may be able to help. There are also things you can do for yourself that may help. For example, being physically active can help your fatigue.

What causes fatigue?

Fatigue may be caused by:

- the cancer
- cancer treatments
- anaemia
- eating problems
- other health problems
- psychological effects of cancer.

The cancer

- For some people, the cancer may cause fatigue.
- This might be because of the symptoms of cancer. For example, parts of your body may be swollen because the cancer has caused a build-up of fluid. This can make them feel heavy and it can be difficult to move around.
- You may feel tired because the cancer has reduced the number of red blood cells. A reduced number of red blood cells is called anaemia.
- Cancers that cause changes in hormone levels, such as breast or prostate cancer, may cause fatigue.

Cancer treatments

- If fatigue is caused by cancer treatment, it usually gets better after treatment finishes. But for some people it may continue for many months, or even years.
- Surgery – Fatigue after surgery is usually temporary but depends on the type of surgery.
- Chemotherapy and radiotherapy – Fatigue usually improves 6 to 12 months after treatment ends but sometimes it can last longer. Sometimes these treatments may cause long-term effects such as breathlessness or heart problems. These are likely to make you feel more tired. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy may also cause anaemia.
- Hormonal therapy and targeted therapy – Some of these therapies can cause fatigue for the time that you are taking them.

We have more information in other languages about surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and side effects of cancer treatment. Visit macmillan.org.uk/translations or call **0808 808 00 00**.

Anaemia

Anaemia is caused by not having enough haemoglobin (Hb) in the blood. Haemoglobin is found in red blood cells and takes oxygen around the body, which gives us energy. If you have anaemia you may feel

- tired
- breathless
- dizzy and light-headed.

Anaemia may be caused by chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Your doctor can check if you have anaemia. If you do have it, you may need treatment to make you feel better.

Eating problems

If you are not eating the same amount of food as you would normally, this may cause you to have less energy and feel tired. It is important to tell your nurse or doctor if you are having problems eating.

If you are nauseous and cannot eat, tell your doctor. They may be able to give you medicine to help. If you cannot take medicine for nausea, or cannot keep it down due to vomiting, speak to your doctor or nurse. There are other ways of taking anti-sickness medicines.

We have a factsheet in [language] called **Eating problems and cancer** that gives more information. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations) or call **0808 808 00 00**.

Pain

If you have pain, this can cause fatigue. Painkillers and other treatments for pain can help. If your pain is relieved, it can also help your fatigue.

Other medical problems

Diabetes, heart problems or thyroid problems may also make fatigue worse. Sometimes, if you are taking medicines for other conditions, these can make you feel tired too.

Loss of muscle strength

If you have fatigue, you may become less active over time. When your muscles are not being used regularly, they become weaker. Having weak muscles means you will find it difficult and tiring to do even simple tasks. It may also mean you are more at risk of falling over.

Being physically active is the best way to keep your muscle strength and build up your energy.

Emotional effects of cancer

Fatigue can be caused by the emotional effects of cancer. People feel different emotions when they have cancer. You might feel worried, sad or angry. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Sometimes, feeling difficult emotions can make it harder to sleep. Then not getting enough sleep can make you more tired.

There are different types of emotional support you may find helpful, including talking and complementary therapies.

Ways to manage fatigue

Ways your healthcare team can help

It is important to talk about fatigue with your healthcare team. There may be ways to improve it.

Your doctor will check for any causes of fatigue that can be treated, such as anaemia. They may examine you and you may have some blood tests. They may also look at the medicines you are taking. This is to check whether they can make changes to them that might improve fatigue. For example, they may reduce the dose of a tablet that makes you sleepy.

Drug treatments for fatigue

There are not any drug treatments to help prevent or improve fatigue yet. Steroids, which are used to treat other health problems, can sometimes be helpful. But they can have side effects, so you should talk to your doctor about the possible benefits and disadvantages.

Research trials are carried out to try to find new and better drug treatments. This includes drug treatments for fatigue. Many hospitals now take part in these trials. Speak to your doctor about whether you could take part in a research trial on treating fatigue.

Getting support

If you are finding it difficult to cope with fatigue, it can help to explain any problems to your doctor or nurse.

Tell them about the activities you find difficult. These activities may be things like climbing stairs, cooking or bathing. Let them know if anything makes the fatigue better or worse. You could try keeping a diary of your fatigue. For example, note down times of day when it is worse or things that help you feel better. You can show it to your doctor or nurse.

Here are some questions you may like to ask:

- What could be causing my fatigue?
- Are there any treatments that may help?
- What can I do to reduce my fatigue?
- Could my medicines be affecting my energy level?
- What help is available?

Things you can do

There are different things you can do to manage your fatigue. Some of these may reduce your fatigue. Others may help you cope better.

Planning ahead

If you have fatigue, planning ahead is important. This helps to make sure you can still do the things you most want to do.

- Use a diary to help you record when you feel your best and when you feel most tired.
- Try to plan bigger tasks for times when you are likely to feel less tired.
- Try to plan enough time to rest after a period of activity.

Make sure you look after your own needs and get enough rest, even if you have others to think about.

Diet

- Eating well can help increase your energy. If you have a reduced appetite or have other problems eating, ask to see a dietitian at the hospital. They can give you advice on what is best to eat.
- When your appetite is good make sure you eat well. You should always try to drink plenty of fluids.
- Keep a diary each day of what you eat and when. Then you can see if you have more energy after certain foods. It might help if someone else can prepare food for you. Or you could buy ready-made meals or use an organisation that delivers meals to your home.

We have a factsheet in [language] called **Healthy eating** that gives more information. Visit macmillan.org.uk/translations or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Physical activity

Physical activity can help reduce fatigue. Being active may help

- boost your appetite
- give you more energy
- build up your muscle strength
- improve sleep.

It is usually safe to start some physical activity during or after treatment. If you decide to do some physical activity, it is important to make sure you do it safely. You could start by sitting up in a chair rather than lying down in bed while you are recovering. Gradually build up to walking short distances around the house. Even if you have been used to regular physical activity before you were diagnosed with cancer, you may need to be more careful.

There are lots of ways you can become more active, including:

- doing more in your house, such as housework or gardening
- walking or cycling to work, shops, or to see friends
- stretching exercises like yoga or tai chi.

Do not exercise if you feel unwell, breathless, or if you have pain. Tell your doctor if you feel unwell.

Before you start to do any physical activity or increase the amount you do, it is important to get advice from a healthcare professional. Your cancer specialist or GP can refer you to a physiotherapist. They can help you build up your physical fitness and muscle strength.

Sleep

Your fatigue may make you feel like sleeping all the time. But it is important to keep to a sleep routine. Most people try to sleep between 6 and 8 hours each night. Good quality sleep may help with fatigue. It may also reduce your need to sleep during the day.

Tips for a better night's sleep:

- Go to bed and get up at about the same time every day.
- Try not to sleep late into the day after a sleepless night. This can lead to a disrupted sleep pattern.
- Try to do gentle exercise like walking. This can help you feel naturally tired and ready for sleep.
- Keep your mind occupied with activities like reading, games or puzzles. This can also help you feel naturally ready to sleep.
- Be aware of how naps affect you. Some people find that daytime naps help them sleep better at night, while others sleep less well after them.
- Steroids can cause sleep problems. If you are taking steroids, ask your doctor if you can take them earlier in the day.

Emotional support

Counselling

Fatigue can affect your emotions. It can make you feel more anxious or lower in mood. If you are struggling emotionally, you may find counselling helpful.

Counsellors are trained to listen. They can help you deal with difficult emotions.

Many hospitals have counsellors or staff who are specially trained to provide emotional support to people affected by cancer. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can tell you what services are available. They can also refer you. Some GPs also have counsellors in their practice, or they can refer you to one.

Support groups

Some people find it helps to talk to other people who have had fatigue. Most areas in the UK have support groups. They are sometimes led by a healthcare professional. Other members of the group may be in a similar position to you.

You can call our Macmillan Support Line on 0808 808 00 00 to find out about support groups in your area. We can try to find out if there is a support group where people speak the same language as you.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are treatments or activities that can make you feel better. They do not treat cancer. There are different complementary therapies that may help with fatigue, such as:

- relaxation
- massage therapy
- yoga.

Some of these therapies may be available on the NHS. Your GP can give you more details. You may also be able to get them through a cancer support group.

To stay safe, it is important to check a therapist's qualifications and experience. If you need help with this, ask your doctor or nurse, or call the Macmillan Support Line on 0808 808 0000.

Before you use a complementary therapy, talk to your specialist doctor or nurse. Some therapies may affect your cancer treatment.

Tips for managing everyday activities

If you need help with things at home then you may be able to ask family, friends and neighbours. Building up a support network can make a big difference. If you always seem to be coping well, your family and friends may not realise how much you need help. Or they may be waiting for you to ask for help.

There are things you can do that may help with everyday tasks.

Housekeeping

- Spread tasks out over the week. Do a little housework each day rather than lots at one time.
- If possible, ask other people to do heavy work, such as gardening.
- Sit down to do some tasks, if you can.
- If possible, employ a cleaner to help. This may be expensive. You may be able to get help at home from social services.

Shopping

- If possible, go grocery shopping with a friend or family member for extra help.
- Most large supermarkets offer online shopping which can be delivered to your home.
- Use a shopping trolley so you do not need to carry a heavy basket. A wheeled shopping bag may help with shopping and getting things home.
- Shop at less busy times.
- Ask shop staff for help packing and taking groceries to the car.

Preparing meals

- Try having ready-made meals or pre-cooked food when you are most tired.
- If you can, sit down while preparing meals.
- Prepare extra meals or double portions when you are feeling less tired and freeze them for when you need them.

Washing and dressing

- Sit down in the bath rather than standing in a shower if you can, as this may help to use less energy.
- Sit down in the shower if you can, to avoid standing for too long. An occupational therapist may be able to get you a shower seat.

Occupational therapists

Occupational therapists help people who have difficulty moving around or doing everyday tasks such as dressing, washing and cooking. They may be able to visit you at home to help you find ways to do things more easily. Your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or GP can refer you to an occupational therapist.

Childcare

If you have a family, you might find it difficult to look after them while coping with fatigue. It can be upsetting when you are unable to do your usual family activities. To make childcare easier you could:

- explain to your children that you feel tired often and will not be able to do as much with them as before.
- plan activities with your children that you can do sitting down – for example, play board games or do a puzzle.
- try to plan activities where there are places for you to sit down while the children play.
- avoid carrying small children – use a pram or pushchair instead.
- try to involve your children in some household tasks.
- ask for and accept help from family and friends.

Driving

Driving can be difficult and dangerous if you feel very tired. You may be less alert than normal, and less able to concentrate. Your reaction time will also be reduced. You might find these tips helpful:

- Do not drive if you feel very tired.
- If possible, ask a family member or friend to drive you.
- If you need to get to hospital appointments, ask your nurse or doctor if there is any hospital transport available so that you do not have to drive.
- If you feel yourself falling asleep while driving, stop in a safe place and take a break.

Coping with fatigue at work

You may find fatigue affects the way you work.

Anyone with cancer is protected by the Equality Act 2010. This means that employers should not treat people with cancer unfairly. It also means that employers are expected to make reasonable adjustments at work to support people with cancer.

You could talk to your employer about:

- changing your hours, or working less
- changing your start and finish time so you can travel to and from work at less busy times
- sharing some of your work with other colleagues
- having a parking place near to where you work
- working from home at agreed times
- doing lighter work if your job involves physical exertion or heavy lifting.

Explaining the effects of fatigue to your colleagues might also help you manage your fatigue at work. It may be difficult for some people to understand how tired you are, especially if you look well.

If you are self-employed, it can help to talk to the Department for Work and Pensions about benefits that you may be entitled to claim. We have a factsheet in [language] called **Financial support – benefits** that gives more information. Visit macmillan.org.uk/translations or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Caring for someone with fatigue

Many people give support to a family member, partner, friend, or neighbour who has fatigue. Caring for someone with fatigue can mean many things, such as helping with personal care, providing transport or organising appointments.

If you are caring for someone with fatigue, there are many simple things that you can do to help:

- Acknowledge that fatigue is difficult for you both.
- Help the person keep a diary of their fatigue. For example, note down times of day when it is worse or things that help them feel better. This will help you both see when the person with fatigue has more or less energy to do things.
- Try to help the person you care for be more active or make changes to their diet.

You can also go to appointments at the hospital with the person you care for. You could help them explain to the healthcare team how the fatigue is affecting you both. You could show them the person's fatigue diary and ask their advice about what else you can do to help.

Looking after yourself

When you are caring for someone else it is important to look after yourself too. Make sure you keep up with your own health appointments. This includes any vaccinations you need, such as the flu jab. If you are taking any medicines regularly, it is important you have a supply of these.

If you can, try to:

- take breaks
- eat well
- be active
- get a good night's sleep
- get some support for yourself – perhaps by talking with other carers in a support group.

You can call our Macmillan Support Line on 0808 808 00 00 to find out about support groups in your area. We can try to find out if there is a support group where people speak the same language as you.

How Macmillan can help you

Macmillan is here to help you and your family. You can get support from:

- **The Macmillan Support Line (0808 808 00 00).** We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. We can answer medical questions, give you information about financial support, or talk to you about your feelings. The phone line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.
- **The Macmillan website (macmillan.org.uk).** Our site has lots of English information about cancer and living with cancer. There is more information in other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations
- **Information and support services.** At an information and support service, you can talk to a cancer support specialist and get written information. Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us. Your hospital might have a centre.
- **Local support groups** – At a support group you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find a group near you at macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups or call us.
- **Macmillan Online Community** – You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at macmillan.org.uk/community

Word list

| Word (target language) | In English | How to say in English (transliteration of English word) | Meaning |
|---------------------------|------------------|--|---|
| | Anaemia | | A reduced number of red blood <u>cells</u> in your blood. |
| | Appetite | | When you feel you want to eat food. |
| | Breathlessness | | Finding it harder to breath or breathing quickly. |
| | Cells | | The tiny building blocks that make up the organs and tissues of our body. |
| | Counsellor | | Someone who is trained to help people cope with their emotions or personal problems. |
| | Chemotherapy | | A cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer <u>cells</u> . |
| | Diabetes | | A condition where the amount of sugar in the blood is too high because the body does not use it properly. |
| | Dietician | | An expert in food and nutrition. They can tell you which foods are best for you. They can also give you advice if you have problems with your diet. |
| | Hormonal therapy | | A cancer treatment that works by affecting hormones in the body. |
| | Hormone | | A substance made by the body that controls how organs work. There are different types of hormones. |
| | Massage | | A complementary therapy that uses touch and gentle |

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|--|------------------------|--|---|
| | | | pressure to relieve tension. |
| | Physiotherapist | | A professional who helps someone use movement or exercise to recover from illness or injury. |
| | Radiotherapy | | A cancer treatment that uses high-energy rays, such as x-rays, to kill cancer cells. |
| | Reasonable adjustments | | Changes to your work that your employer can make to allow you to stay at work or return to work. Laws that protect people from discrimination say that your employer must make these changes in certain situations. |
| | Steroids | | A medicine that some people may have as part of their cancer treatment. |
| | Surgery | | A way of treating cancer by removing all or part of the cancer. This is also known as having an operation. |
| | Tai chi | | A type of exercise that combines deep breathing and relaxation with slow movements. |
| | Targeted therapy | | A cancer treatment that uses drugs that target and attack cancer cells. |
| | Thyroid | | A gland in the neck that releases hormones into the blood. |
| | Yoga | | A type of exercise using gentle stretching, deep breathing and movement. |

More information in [language]

We have information in [language] about these topics:

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Types of cancer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breast cancer• Large bowel cancer• Lung cancer• Prostate cancer <p>Treatments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chemotherapy• Radiotherapy• Surgery | <p>Coping with cancer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you're diagnosed with cancer – A quick guide• Eating problems and cancer• End of life• Financial support – benefits• Financial support – help with costs• Healthy eating• Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer• Side effects of cancer treatment• What you can do to help yourself |
|---|--|

To see this information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

Speak to us in [language]

You can call Macmillan free on **0808 808 00 00** and speak to us in [language] through an interpreter. You can talk to us about your worries and medical questions. Just say [language] in English when you call (say “xxxxx”).

We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.

References and thanks

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into [language] by a translation company.

The information included is based on the Macmillan booklet **Coping with fatigue**. We can send you a copy, but the full booklet is only available in English.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Consultant Medical Oncologist and Macmillan Chief Medical Editor.

With thanks to: Terry Capecci, Palliative Care Nurse, and Jane Eades, Head of Clinical Effectiveness, Marie Curie. Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk**

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