

# **Fatigue: a common problem**

## **Introduction**

Fatigue means feeling tired and exhausted. Fatigue can be constant, or you may find that there are times when you feel less tired, and other times when it feels too difficult to do everyday tasks, and no amount of resting seems to make any difference. During treatment you might expect to feel tired as a side effect of surgery, radiation and/or chemotherapy. At that time fatigue may not be a surprise to you. However, what is surprising for many women is ongoing fatigue once their treatment has been completed. Not every woman experiences fatigue, but for those who do, it is important to remember that while fatigue can be distressing, it is a common problem.

## **The effects of fatigue**

Fatigue affects everyone differently and can have many different effects on your day-to-day life. Some of the more common symptoms that accompany fatigue are: Some of the more common symptoms of fatigue are:

- Loss of interest in everyday things
- Feeling low in mood
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty remembering things
- Finding it hard to make decisions
- Feeling you don't have the strength to do things
- Feeling you just want to stay in bed
- Irritability
- Loss of sex drive
- Loss of desire to do things that used to give you enjoyment
- Loss of interest in friends and family.

Many women experience anxiety, stress and uncertainty following their diagnosis and, together with changes in sleeping and eating patterns, these can all contribute to fatigue. In addition, treatment often starts soon after you are diagnosed. So, while your body is trying to cope with treatment, your mind is trying to deal with the shock of the diagnosis. Travelling to and from the hospital or treatment centre and dealing with other treatment side-effects can also be tiring.

Fatigue can also result from the treatment itself. If you are feeling fatigued while undergoing treatment, talk to the health professionals involved in your care. Often people think that they shouldn't "bother" the health professionals, or that they would not be interested. Fatigue is not a sign of weakness, laziness or failure to cope. Health professionals are involved in your overall care and need to know about your emotional and physical well-being.

## **Fatigue after treatment**

Once treatment is completed, many women expect to return to their previous energy levels. While many women do, a significant number of women continue to feel fatigued. This usually improves after a short while, but it can continue for longer. Some women find it can take one or two years to fully recover. During this time there are a number of things you can do to help yourself cope with ongoing fatigue.

## **Coping with fatigue**

**Support:** After treatment, many women find that the support they received during treatment from friends and family dwindles or disappears. There is a general expectation that it is now time to "get on with things", and "put your experience behind you". Most women find this easier said than done, and continue to need practical and/or emotional support for some time. It is important to explain to partners, family and friends that you are not yet able to take on a full load, that this is normal, and you still need their help. Be specific, identify the tasks with which you are having difficulty and suggest ways that they can be useful.

Often women say they feel "guilty", that they "should" be able to do all the things they were able to do before their illness. Remember that while you may not be undergoing treatment, your body and mind still have a lot of healing and adjusting to do. This all takes effort, and sometimes there is just not enough energy left over to do the everyday things. It may be necessary for you to relax housekeeping standards, accept offers of help with shopping, cooking, and other tasks, and delegate others to take on some of your more exhausting roles. It is important also to recognise how much you are achieving. Try focusing on what you can do, rather than what you find too hard. Think about your expectations; are they unrealistic right now? Knowing what you have been through, would you expect someone

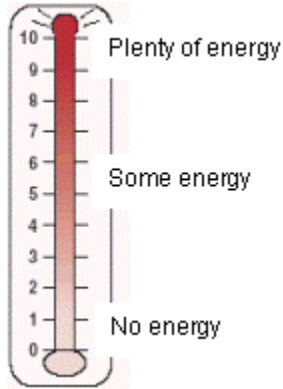
else in your place to be doing what you are expecting of yourself? Maybe you would be encouraging them to do what they can, while setting themselves achievable goals to work towards? Sometimes the messages we would give to others are the ones we need to give to ourselves.

**Sleep:** You may find that your sleeping habits have changed. Some women say they are constantly running through the "what ifs" in their minds when they are trying to sleep. If this is happening to you, make sure that you don't let your bed become your "worry couch". If you are unable to sleep because of your thoughts, it is best to get up for a short while, do something to help calm yourself, then return to bed. Avoid stimulants (coffee, tea, alcohol, nicotine, sugars etc.) in the evening as these may make your anxiety levels higher. Menopausal factors may be stopping you getting 'a good nights sleep'. Hot flushes at night and increased urinary frequency can mean you find yourself waking in the night. Check these symptoms out with your health care team or local health clinic. Help with these troubling symptoms can also help you sleep better.

**Diet and exercise:** You may find that your eating habits have changed, or you may no longer enjoy certain foods. Maintaining a well balanced diet can be hard at this time, but good nutrition can play an important part in your healing. In addition, you may be feeling too tired to exercise. Gentle exercise such as walking can help you overcome fatigue, even if you don't feel like it. As everybody has different needs, talk to your doctor or health professional if you need advice. Together you can come up with an appropriate and balanced diet and exercise plan that suits you. Dieticians are often available in major hospitals, to provide additional advice.

## **Energy Diary**

Some women find keeping an Energy Diary (a note of their energy levels) helps them to identify times when they have more energy than others. Recognising your "good" times allows you to plan your days. You may also note certain things that seem to drain your energy more than others, and work on ways of dealing with this. It may also be useful to you when you speak about your fatigue to doctors, family, friends and employers. On the next page is an example of an energy diary that you can print and photocopy.



## Energy Diary

To help you keep track of your energy levels, indicate how you are feeling on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being 'no energy at all' and 10 being 'full of energy'. Write the number that best suits your energy level in the diary below. If you can, do this in the morning, afternoon and evening. You might also want to note what you were doing at the time.

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
<b>Mon</b>				<b>Mon</b>			
Doing				Doing			
<b>Tues</b>				<b>Tues</b>			
Doing				Doing			
<b>Wed</b>				<b>Wed</b>			
Doing				Doing			
<b>Thurs</b>				<b>Thurs</b>			
Doing				Doing			
<b>Fri</b>				<b>Fri</b>			
Doing				Doing			
<b>Sat</b>				<b>Sat</b>			
Doing				Doing			
<b>Sun</b>				<b>Sun</b>			
Doing				Doing			