

Fatigue (tiredness)

Fatigue is a feeling of extreme tiredness and lack of energy. It affects many Hospice patients during their illness. Unlike tiredness, it isn't usually relieved by sleep. It tends to come on suddenly. Hospice patients describe fatigue as paralysing. Fatigue is a natural part of the progression of an illness and is a very common but demoralising symptom.

- It may be hard for you to do things that you would normally take for granted such as cooking, shopping, taking a shower or climbing the stairs.
- You may get short of breath much more easily—even after light activity.
- You may find it difficult to concentrate and you may have to think harder about decisions.
- You may feel as if you have no energy. You may feel as if you could spend the whole day in bed.
- You may not enjoy the things you usually do, such as sport, walking, reading or watching t.v.

What causes fatigue?

It may be caused by:-

1. **Advancing disease**—severe fatigue is natural and normal in patients with advanced, incurable illness. There are chemical and metabolic processes in the body that cause fatigue. It is not under the patient's control and so a patient should never be made to feel guilty for feeling so tired and weak.
2. **Anaemia**—this means that you have fewer red blood cells than normal. Anaemia may be caused by cancer, blood loss, or a shortage of iron, or perhaps by the treatment you are having. If your anaemia is severe, special treatment may be possible—your doctor will discuss this with you. A blood transfusion is one way of treating anaemia.
3. **Your cancer treatment or drugs**—radiotherapy, chemotherapy, surgery and certain medications can make you feel tired, listless and fed up. Most medications that cause drowsiness only do so for a few days.
4. **Your emotional state** - feeling anxious, worried, depressed or sad can drain you of energy.
5. **Losing your appetite**—if you lose your appetite you may not eat enough to give you the energy you need. This can make you tired and you may lose weight.
6. **Pain**—prolonged or constant pain can contribute to fatigue.
7. **Maintaining a routine**—pushing yourself to maintain your old lifestyle, activities and routines may add to your fatigue.

How can I cope with everyday activities?

Here are some tips ...

Shopping

- Make a list of what you need, before you set out.
- Try to shop at less busy times.
- Use a shopping trolley instead of carrying baskets.
- Go shopping with a friend so they can help you if you get tired.
- Ask staff to help you pack your shopping bags and carry them to your car.
- You could try a different way of shopping—if you have a computer, for instance, you may be able to order on the internet and have your goods delivered to you.

Housework

- Don't try to do it all at once. Plan ahead and spread tasks over the week.
- If you can, sit down while working. For example, you may be able to sit while ironing, preparing a meal or washing up.
- Ask others to do the heavier work for you.
- Avoid heavy lifting. Drag or slide objects if you can.
- Keep the items you use most often in easy-to-reach places. Avoid very low and very high cupboards.

Cooking

- Have a chair or stool handy to rest on.
- Try cooking simpler meals.
- At times, when you have more energy, make double portions and freeze some for later.
- Convenience foods are useful when you're tired.
- Keep your kitchen utensils and ingredients in easy-to-reach places.

Children

- Ask older children to help with household chores. They could tidy their own rooms or do the dishes!
- For younger children, make some of the housework into a game so that they can help (picking things up from the floor, or dusting the furniture).
- Encourage children to try some quiet activities from time to time, such as drawing and reading.
- Ask a friend or relative to look after the children so that you can have a break.

Will I still be able to go to work?

You may want—and be able to—carry on working. If so, that's fine. However, try to think about how you can make things easier for yourself at work.

For example, you could rearrange your work space so everything you need is close to hand or you may be able to put off more tiring tasks until a later date. If your employers are sympathetic, try talking with them about your needs. You may be able to adjust your hours,

for instance, or build some rest periods into your day.

If you find you are simply too tired to go to work, don't feel guilty. Many patients need to take time off to rest.

If this happens to you, you may be able to claim sick pay or benefits. The hospice social worker can advise you.

Who else can help me?

Remember that your doctors, nurses and others in the hospice care team are all here to help you—so if you have any questions or worries, please tell them. They will do their best to advise you and to find people who can give you more support if you need it.

Medication for fatigue

The hospice doctor may prescribe medication such as cortisone, that will temporarily increase your energy levels and boost your mood. Although certain drugs have a good effect on fatigue, it is usually not long lasting and medication may need to be reduced or stopped if no longer effective.

Fighting fatigue or 'giving in'?

There comes a time when a patient no longer has the energy or inclination to fight fatigue. This is a normal and natural part of the progression of an advanced illness. Patients will become weaker and more drowsy and eventually sleep most of the day and night.

Although this is sometimes difficult for loved-ones to accept, it is advisable to allow patients to rest and sleep because this is where they are most peaceful and comfortable. Forcing a patient to get up and eat and exercise is not always the most appropriate way to manage the fatigue related to a terminal illness.

Remember, the fatigue is not under the patient's control. It is due to the illness and irreversible.

The hospice staff will guide you and provide the support and reassurance you need during this time. Please feel free to ask any questions and hospice staff will endeavour to answer all your queries and concerns.