Ovarian Cancer Fatigue: Why It Happens and How to Cope

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Coping With Ovarian Cancer Fatigue

Ovarian cancer fatigue can make you feel tired, exhausted, drained and can affect your daily life. This type of fatigue is generally a side effect of your cancer treatments or a symptom of the cancer.

Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most common symptoms in people with ovarian cancer. One qualitative study in a 2015 paper by researchers from the University of Texas found at least 93 percent of ovarian cancer patients report fatigue, with at least 20 percent reporting severe levels of fatigue.

Another 2015 study out of Bergen, Norway, found cancer fatigue was reported by at least 53 percent of women treated for gynecological cancers and patients with fatigue reported higher levels of anxiety and depression. There was also a connection between fatigue and life quality.

Culprits of Fatigue

Fatigue can be the result of your body working to repair damage, a medication side effect, or a symptom of some of the side effects of treatment, including anemia, pain, mood changes, and sleep issues. It may also result from poor nutrition habits due to appetite changes and weight loss.

The Actual Cancer

Ovarian cancer can increase your body's need for energy, cause muscle weakness and organ damage, and affect your body's hormones, which all lead to increased fatigue.

Cancer Treatment

Surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation all cause fatigue. Surgery requires recovery and chemotherapy and radiation destroy healthy cells in addition to cancer cells. A side effect of both chemotherapy and radiation is fatigue.

Anemia

You may develop anemia because cancer treatments destroy healthy red blood cells. In addition to fatigue, anemia also causes fast heartbeat, shortness of breath, breathing troubles, dizziness, and pale skin.

The prevalence of anemia in cancer patients is up 40 percent and the risk of anemia increases as chemotherapy progresses according to a 2010 report published in the *Annals of Oncology*.

Sleep Issues

If you are struggling to sleep at night or waking up often, you will likely experience fatigue during the daytime. Sleep disturbances are common and persistent in women who have ovarian cancer and can lead to depression and reduced quality of life according to researchers out of the University of Iowa. Likewise, 72 percent of cancer patients report sleep disturbances, not feeling rested in the morning, and daytime fatigue.

Poor Nutrition

When you have cancer, changes in your appetite can lead to poor nutrition, resulting in fatigue. Your body may not process nutrients like it used to, resulting in deficiencies which also cause fatigue.

Mood

Fatigue is a symptom of anxiety, depression, and stress. Being diagnosed with cancer and undergoing harsh treatments can affect your mental wellbeing.

Pain

Ovarian cancer pain results when a tumor starts to put pressure on organs, nerves, muscles, and/or bones. Treatments, such as chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery, can cause pain and burning. Being in pain all the time is tiring.

Cancer pain can make it difficult to be active, eat healthy, and sleep well and can cause depression, all of which contribute to fatigue.

Fatigue Experience

Not everyone with cancer will experience fatigue, but it general, most people do. The level of fatigue you experience depends on the type of cancer, the stage, and type of treatments used to treat your cancer.

There will be days where you will feel a little fatigued and others where you feel completely drained. Your ovarian cancer fatigue will come and go or it may last for long durations; it may even last long after treatment is done.

Most of the fatigue you experience is normal, but if you find your fatigue is constant and lasting weeks at a time and/or affecting your life quality, it is important to talk to your doctor.

Coping and Managing Fatigue

Medications are available to treat the various causes of fatigue, including anemia, depression, anxiety, mood, pain, and nutrition deficiencies. Your doctor may also prescribe medications to help you sleep better at night.

Self-care can also help you to cope and manage fatigue.

It is important to make sure you have enough energy to do the things you need to do. Sometimes that means accepting you cannot do everything. Ask family and friends to help with tasks that are tiring or hard to do on your own.

Make sure you are eating as well as you can and getting the nutrients your body needs to heal. Drink at least eight glasses of water per day to avoid dehydration.

Try to balance rest and activity because too much time not moving can make you weak. It is also important to keep moving so check with your doctor about the best types of physical exercise for your unique situation.

Lastly, it is important to learn to find ways to reduce and manage your stress. Try deep breathing, prayer, meditation, art therapy, listening to calming music, or speaking with mental health professional to help you better handle stress and manage your moods.

There is no right or wrong way to treat fatigue. Your doctor can help you to find ways to get the help you need to manage it, but it is important to speak up about how bad it is and how it affects your life quality.