Cancer Fatigue: Learning How to Cope With Exhaustion

by ALISON RICHARDS

How to Overcome Cancer Fatigue

I'm extremely familiar with and know how to overcome cancer fatigue. Nearly three years ago I received my diagnosis and have finished active treatment over a year ago. The lack of energy compared to the fit and healthy life I had before cancer is very frustrating. It feels so debilitating and affects many aspects of everyday life.

I wanted to find out more about cancer fatigue, to see if there was anything I could do to reduce its impact and help me thrive, not just survive.

What is Cancer Fatigue?

Cancer fatigue is when you experience symptoms of fatigue, either as a result of the cancer itself or from a side effect of cancer treatment. Fatigue is when you feel exhausted, lack energy, or feel really tired, even when you have had enough rest and sleep.

When you have cancer fatigue it affects your whole life: physically, emotionally, and mentally. It can last for years after treatment has finished.

How Does Cancer Fatigue Affect Your Life?

Cancer fatigue affects many areas of your daily life. You lack energy, so you are less likely to undertake physical activities, like exercise. You may not feel like doing other hobbies, or even meet with friends, as they can make you exhausted. Housework is a challenge too, and if you have a physical job, then you may underperform there too.

Cancer fatigue gets you down emotionally too. Not being able to do the physical things in life means that you may miss out on relationships with friends. Being less able to exercise may mean you put on weight which can get you down too.

Your general outlook can be affected, and you may think there is little hope for the future, even if you are usually a positive person. The joy of finishing treatment can be short-lived when you realize that the long-term effects are quite debilitating.

What Are the Symptoms of Cancer Fatigue?

Cancer fatigue has many symptoms, both physical and emotional.

Physical symptoms:

- A complete lack of energy, so you may not feel like getting out of bed in the morning.

- You may lack motivation to do anything, even fun activities which you would usually enjoy.
- You may experience pain in joints or muscles, so exercise can be painful, both during the activity and afterwards.
- You may get short of breath, even when walking short distances or climbing a flight of stairs.
- You may find it hard to get to sleep or wake frequently in the night.

Emotional symptoms:

- Feeling sad, anxious or depressed, and you may have negative feelings about yourself or others.
- It may be hard to make decisions, or even think clearly about things that would usually be simple to solve.
- You may struggle to concentrate, whether it is reading a book, watching TV, or chatting to a friend.

What Causes Cancer Fatigue?

There are many reasons why you may be suffering from cancer fatigue.

The Disease Itself

The first cause is the cancer itself, which can weaken muscles, decrease the amount of energy your body needs, and cause hormonal imbalances, which all contribute to a feeling of exhaustion, or fatigue.

Disease Treatment

Your cancer treatment could be causing the fatigue, whether it is chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or surgery. It could be that you are experiencing cancer fatigue as a result of hormone therapy, or a bone marrow transplant.

Treatment Side Effects

The side effects of cancer treatment can cause fatigue, for example anemia, insomnia, pain, feeling sick, and certain mood changes.

Chronic Pain

Ongoing pain from cancer treatment leads to fatigue because it may keep you awake at night, make you less likely to exercise, or eat less. All of these contribute to having a lack of energy.

How to Cope With Cancer Fatigue

If you feel like you are suffering with cancer fatigue then you should contact your doctor, as there are many things that you can try to help.

It’s often a domino effect, where treating some symptoms can help others. For example, if you were to get more sleep at night then you may have more energy in the day to exercise, which will improve your mood.

For physical symptoms, like anemia, a simple blood test will be used, and you can take iron to bump up your red blood cells. There are other treatments for anemia including a drug called erythropoietin, which is a hormone made by the kidneys to encourage the body to make more red blood cells. In extreme cases you could have a blood transfusion.

Fatigue, Exercise, and Rest

Although exercise may be the last thing you feel like doing, it can really help with your mood. Even a short walk will help and you could challenge yourself to achieve a certain number of steps per day. Many smartphones and activity watches will count your steps without the need for a pedometer.

It’s important to get enough rest, so if you have an afternoon slump take some time to take a short nap if you need to.

Follow the guidelines to getting a good night’s sleep, which includes keeping a good routine, making your room calm and relaxing, and eliminating caffeine from your evenings. Take a bath before bed, or read a book to relax you.

Mental Health Support

If you feel anxious or depressed, then your doctor may prescribe medication to lift your mood. Ask for help from friends or family, whether it is sharing the household chores or doing the shopping. Don’t be afraid to reach out.

Get Help From Your Medical Team

It’s a really good idea to keep a diary of your cancer fatigue symptoms because you will be able to discuss them with your medical team to see how they can help.

Treating the causes of cancer fatigue can help with so many of the symptoms, so do not suffer in silence!