

# Extreme Tiredness

## What is it?

One of the most common side effects of cancer treatment is a feeling of *extreme tiredness* or *fatigue*. This is not the kind of tiredness that comes after you've missed a night of sleep, but a deep exhaustion that no amount of sleep seems to touch. This fatigue can negatively affect your overall quality of life more than any other side effect from cancer treatment. So don't ignore it, and don't minimize it.

Although this fatigue is difficult to manage, it doesn't mean your cancer is getting worse. Fatigue can be caused by many factors, including chemotherapy-related anemia, problems sleeping, pain, anxiety, depression, low thyroid function, lack of exercise, inadequate nutrition, and the side effects of some medications.

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of extreme fatigue are vague and difficult to pinpoint, but generally include:

- Very low energy level and increased need to rest after normal (not strenuous) physical activity
- Overall weakness, including a heavy feeling in your arms and legs
- Difficulty completing daily activities
- Difficulty concentrating or thinking clearly

## How is it diagnosed?

Although there are no medical tests to measure extreme tiredness, you should still let your health care professionals know about your fatigue. It could be caused by *anemia*, a blood condition in which your bone marrow doesn't make enough oxygen-carrying red blood cells. Anemia can be diagnosed with a simple blood test to determine your red blood cell (*hematocrit*) and *hemoglobin levels*.

## How is it treated?

Although there is no medical treatment for extreme fatigue, if you have anemia, your doctor can treat you with prescription iron supplements or medication to help your *bone marrow* make more red blood cells. Otherwise, the best way to treat extreme fatigue is with lifestyle changes, such as those described in the Tips to Help section.



TIPS

## Tips to Help

The best way to manage extreme fatigue is by taking care of yourself. For instance:

- Prioritize your activities to conserve energy. Schedule important activities earlier in the day when you have more energy and postpone less important tasks or ask other people to help. Keep a diary to track your high and low energy levels.
- Get some physical activity every day. Even a 10-minute walk can help with the fatigue.
- Eat a healthy diet. Aim for foods high in iron, such as green leafy vegetables, red meat, and seafood.
- Take naps during the day, but limit them to 30 minutes.
- Maintain a normal sleep routine. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Rest between activities.

## Words to Know

**Anemia:** Anemia results when you have a low red blood cell and hemoglobin count.

**Bone marrow:** The spongy tissue in the center of bone that makes blood cells.

**Hemoglobin:** A protein that enables red blood cells to carry oxygen.

**Hematocrit:** Percent of whole blood that is red blood cells.