

Fatigue

Side Effects – Symptoms & Solutions

What is asthenia?

The most common complaint reported by cancer patients is a condition known as asthenia (as-THÉE-nee-uh), which is a medical term for fatigue. However, this condition may feel different from the fatigue you experienced before developing cancer. Some patients may experience physical, mental, or emotional fatigue that is not relieved by rest for days, weeks, or months. The fatigue will go away gradually after treatment is complete.

What causes asthenia/fatigue?

Fatigue may result from cancer treatments or from the disease itself; however, the cause is not fully understood. Poor sleep, pain or pain medications, stress, poor diet, or a low blood count (anemia) may also lead to fatigue.

How can I cope with asthenia/fatigue?

- Plan to rest a little each day with breaks or short naps that will not disturb your sleep at night.
- Keep a daily diary and note your energy levels after your cancer treatments. This can help you with scheduling important activities.
- Allow others to help you with your daily errands, and save your energy for the important things.
- Discuss any sleep problems with your doctor or nurse.
- Limit your intake of caffeine and alcoholic drinks.
- Balance your diet and drink plenty of water, unless given other instructions by your doctor or nurse.
- Exercise lightly or take short walks, if your doctor approves.
- Consider doing activities you enjoy, but do them more easily or for less time.
- Activities that may help fatigue include meditation, prayer, yoga, guided imagery, and visualization.

The information contained herein is not comprehensive and is intended only as a guide.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about appropriate ways to deal with your fatigue, and inform them of any worsening in your energy level.

Other suggestions from your healthcare providers:

Suggested Strategies for Energy Conservation

Activities of Daily Living

- Sit down to bathe and dry off.
- Use a shower/bath organizer to decrease leaning and reaching
- Install grab rails in the bathroom.
- Use extension handles on sponges and brushes.
- Use an elevated toilet seat.
- Organize time to avoid rushing.
- Lay out clothes and toiletries before dressing.
- Minimize leaning over to put on clothes and shoes.
- Modify the home environment to maximize efficient use of energy.
- Wear comfortable clothes and low-heeled shoes.

Housekeeping

- Schedule household tasks throughout the week.
- Do housework sitting down when possible.
- Delegate housework, shopping, laundry, and child care when possible.

Shopping

- Organize list by aisle.
- Use a grocery cart for support.
- Shop at less-busy times.
- Request assistance in getting to the car.

Meal Preparation

- Use convenience foods/easy-to-prepare foods.
- Use small appliances (they take less effort to use.)
- Arrange the preparation environment for easy access to frequently used items.
- Prepare meals sitting down.
- Soak dishes instead of scrubbing and let dishes air dry.
- Prepare double portions and freeze half.

Child Care

- Plan activities to allow for sitting down (e.g., drawing pictures, playing games, reading, computer games.)
- Teach children to climb up on the lap or into the highchair instead of being lifted.

Workplace

- Plan workload to take advantage of peak energy times.
- Arrange work environment for easy access to commonly used equipment and supplies.

Leisure

- Do activities with a companion
- Select activities that match energy level.
- Balance activity and rest (don't get overtired.)

Note: Based on information from Donovan, E. (1995, October 25). "Energy conservation." In Fatigue Initiative through Research and Education (FIRE) course. Educational program sponsored by Oncology Nursing Society and Ortho Biotech IN., Phoenix, AZ.