

Fatigue and pancreatic cancer



What is fatigue?

Fatigue is extreme tiredness. It is not the same as just feeling tired. You might feel both mentally drained and physically exhausted. Even after sleeping, you might still feel tired. It can be hard to explain to other people what it feels like.

Fatigue is a very common symptom of pancreatic cancer, and many people will have it at some point. There are things that can help you deal with fatigue, and this leaflet has lots of tips that you may find helpful.

“You feel as though you are walking through treacle. You feel extremely tired all the time. You’re very lethargic but don’t understand why because you haven’t done anything different to your normal routine.”

Becki

Our specialist nurses are experts in pancreatic cancer, and can answer your questions about fatigue. Call them on **0808 801 0707** or email: **nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk**

You can read more about fatigue at: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/fatigue**

Why does pancreatic cancer cause fatigue?

Lots of things can cause fatigue:

- the cancer itself
- symptoms of the cancer, for example pain or digestion problems
- treatments for the cancer, including chemotherapy, surgery, or radiotherapy
- your feelings and emotions.

“The cancer affects your eating, making you weak. It affects your toilet habits, which makes you feel uncomfortable, so you don’t want to eat anyway. It all has a knock-on effect – all these little things add to fatigue. It’s all connected.”

“You don’t realise how much the medication can make somebody really tired. Once he started taking the tablets he became very lethargic and sleepy and couldn’t do as much.”

Does chemotherapy cause fatigue?

Chemotherapy is one of the main treatments for pancreatic cancer. Fatigue is a common side effect.

Some people find fatigue starts a few hours or a few days after having chemotherapy and improves after a few days. It can take several months to recover from fatigue.

Tips for coping with fatigue during chemotherapy

See how the chemotherapy affects you and how much activity you can manage. For example, you may want to do very little on the days after chemotherapy when you may have fatigue.

Tell your chemotherapy team if you are struggling with fatigue. They may be able to reduce the dose to help with your fatigue. This is common, and is the best way to make sure you have chemotherapy regularly and feel as well as possible.

“I was sleeping 17 hours a day. When I mentioned it to the oncology team, my chemotherapy dose was adjusted, resulting in improved wakefulness.”



“After my surgery and chemotherapy, I still become very fatigued. I know when I’ve done too much and need to have a rest, or a ‘nana nap’, as my children call it.”

Becki

What can help with fatigue?

Because fatigue has a lot of possible causes, you might need to try a combination of things to manage it. Your medical team may try to work out what might be causing the fatigue and how best to manage it.

It's not always possible to relieve fatigue completely. But there are different things your medical team can try to help you deal with it.

There are also lots of things you can try yourself. These tips might help.

- **Planning your time** can help you do more of the things you want or need to do. Plan to do activities when you have more energy and to rest when you need to. It is important to pace yourself.
- A **fatigue diary can help** you see when you have more energy and help you plan your time. You might want to record what you did, any treatments you had, how bad the fatigue was and anything that made the fatigue better or worse.
- **Be honest with people** (and yourself) about what you can manage. They will understand.
- **Ask family or friends to help with things** like household tasks, childcare or driving you to appointments. You may find that people like being able to help.

- **Talk to your medical team if you have any big events** coming up, such as weddings. They may be able to make temporary changes to your medicine to allow you to go to them more easily.

“I would plan for the fatigue if there was something I needed to do, so I would ensure I was doing less on the day or two immediately before and after an event.”

- Pancreatic cancer can affect your digestion, which means that you don't get the energy you need from your food. **Pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT) can help** with this. Speak to your doctor or dietitian about PERT.
- **Stay as active as you can.** Gentle physical activity may help with fatigue and increase your energy levels.

“After chemotherapy ended, I was referred for physiotherapy. The sessions introduced gentle exercise to improve my core strength and stamina and were very helpful.”

- **Try online shopping** rather than going out to the shops.
- **Use ready-made meals**, or make large amounts when you cook, and freeze portions for future meals.



“My neighbours and my whole community really got behind me and offered to come and help clean the house, walk the dogs and take the children to school. It’s important if you feel you need help that you take it. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. And people want to help.”

Sharon

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a type of talking therapy. It can **help you deal with worries by changing how you think and feel about them**. It may help you find ways to deal with fatigue and problems sleeping.
- You may find that **having a short nap gives you a bit more energy**. But try to limit how long you nap to about 30 minutes, as sleeping too long can make it harder to sleep at night.
- Some people find that complementary therapies like massage and meditation helps them with fatigue. **It's very important to speak to your medical team or GP before trying any complementary therapy** as some may affect your cancer treatment. And always tell your complementary therapist about your cancer treatment.
- If you are working, **talk to your employer** about any changes they could make so you can carry on working. For example, working part time or changing your duties.
- **You may be able to get help from social services** if you need help at home with everyday tasks like washing and dressing. Speak to your GP or nurse to find out how to access this support.

“The fatigue made working full-time difficult so I had to work flexibly to allow for rest periods.”



"A friend of mine sent me some meditation tapes, which I find quite useful. They give me the chance to go to sleep. You get lulled into the breathing and the exercises. That helps me with the tiredness."

Mark

How can I get support?

Fatigue can be difficult to deal with, but getting some support can help.

- Family and friends may be able to help with practical things and offer emotional support.
- Your medical team can help you manage your fatigue and tell you about local support.
- You may find online resources helpful, like Macmillan Cancer Support's RESTORE programme. Find out more about this at: **can-restore.org.uk**

How we can help

Our friendly specialist nurses can provide practical, honest information to help you manage fatigue.

Call free on 0808 801 0707 or email:

nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Connect with others affected by pancreatic cancer through our online community, Circles. Join WhatsApp or Facebook groups with people who really understand. Find out more at: **pancreaticcancer.org.uk/circles**

We have more information about fatigue at:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/fatigue

Find out more about our support at:
pancreaticcancer.org.uk/support

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