

CHEMOTHERAPY SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT: FATIGUE

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

Why does chemotherapy sometimes cause fatigue?

Although symptoms vary from patient to patient, anticancer medications (chemotherapy) can sometimes leave patients feeling unusually tired and weak. Anticancer medications mostly affect cells that divide rapidly. In addition to cancer cells, blood cells also divide rapidly and may be affected by chemotherapy. Blood cells carry oxygen to all parts of the body, fight infection, and help the blood to clot. When blood cells are affected by chemotherapy, patients are more likely to feel tired and weak, get infections, and to bruise or bleed easily. Fatigue is also common in patients undergoing chemotherapy because of the other side effects that treatments produce. Fatigue may be related to diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, and the frequent infections that cancer patients may get due to a compromised immune system.

What can I do to prevent or manage fatigue?

Talk to your physician about ways to save your energy and treat your fatigue. In addition, the following strategies may be helpful:

- Plan your day so that you have time to rest.
- Take short naps or breaks, rather than one long rest period.
- Save your energy for the most important things.
- Try easier or shorter versions of activities you enjoy.
- Take short walks or do light exercise.
- Try activities such as meditation, prayer, yoga, or guided imagery.

In addition, it is important to try to manage other symptoms that you are experiencing that may be causing or aggravating fatigue. Try to maintain good nutrition throughout the course of treatments. Chemotherapy can leave you feeling weak. Side effects such as diarrhea, nausea and vomiting deplete the body of essential nutrients. Although it may be difficult to eat during treatments because of nausea, vomiting and/or taste changes, it is more important than ever to eat well. If you are experiencing symptoms that prevent you from eating, consult with your physician. Many medications are available to diminish or prevent the side effects of chemotherapy. Leaving these symptoms untreated may increase your fatigue, make you more prone to complications and prolong your treatments.

For more information on chemotherapy or cancer, contact your physician or The American Cancer Society at 1.800.889.3340.