

COPING WITH FATIGUE

Fatigue is one of the most common side effects of radiation therapy treatments and can be a result of treating disease in any part of the body. Although some patients have few side effects from radiation therapy and continue their usual activities throughout treatment, many notice tiredness beginning a few weeks after the start of treatment. This fatigue diminishes gradually after treatment ends.

The reasons for treatment-related fatigue are complex. It is due in part to the treatment itself: The body expends a lot of energy to heal itself following radiation therapy treatments, which destroy cancer cells and some normal cells, as well. Fatigue also can be due to the cancer, the emotional stress of coping with cancer and changes in routine that cancer causes, such as daily appointments for treatment.

All troublesome symptoms related to your illness and treatment should be discussed with your physician or radiation therapist, a professional who is highly educated and skilled in using radiation to treat disease. If you experience fatigue during radiation therapy treatments, you can take practical steps to help conserve your energy, feel better and recover more quickly.

First, pace yourself and don't try to do too much. Focus on the things that are most important to you and realize that you probably will not be able to do everything during treatment that you did before.

If you are employed, you may want to take time off during your radiation therapy treatment. Another possibility may be to temporarily reduce your work schedule. Ask your supervisor about working part time, job sharing or doing some of your work at home.

Make rest and sleep a personal priority. Get extra sleep each night and arrange your schedule so you can take breaks or naps during the day if necessary. Several short naps may be more rejuvenating than a single long one.

Ask for help from family, friends, neighbors, coworkers and others who can lend a hand. They can reduce the burden on you by assisting with housecleaning, cooking, child care, grocery shopping and errands.

Try to continue doing the activities you enjoyed before treatment, as long as they aren't overtiring. Plan leisure-time activities that are relaxing and restful.

Although sexual activity is OK for many patients undergoing radiation therapy, some lose interest in sex because of fatigue. This is usually a temporary problem. Light or moderate exercise, such as walking, can help fight fatigue and leave you with renewed energy. However, be sure to talk with your physician before starting any new exercise or physical activity.

Some patients find it helpful to join a support group to share ideas about coping with the effects of cancer and cancer treatment, including fatigue. Ask your physician or radiation therapist about groups in your area.

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