What is it?

Cancer-related fatigue is a feeling of persistent physical, emotional and/or cognitive tiredness or exhaustion and is related to the cancer or cancer treatments. This fatigue is not related to recent activity and interferes with your day to day function. It is more pervasive, debilitating and longer lasting than normal fatigue, and is not relieved by adequate sleep or rest. Fatigue can occur on its own or more commonly in combination with other symptoms such as pain, depression, difficulty sleeping and anaemia.

What causes it?

The mechanisms responsible for cancer-related fatigue are poorly understood. Risk factors and factors contributing to fatigue include:

- cancer therapies, including surgery, chemotherapy, targeted therapy and radiotherapy
- anaemia
- other medical conditions (e.g. thyroid disorders’ heart or lung conditions)
- symptoms such as pain or nausea and vomiting
- poor sleep
- depression or anxiety
What are the signs and symptoms?

Fatigue can occur at any time during treatment and usually improves after treatment is completed, however it may persist for months or years. Symptoms include:

- reduced energy or increased need to rest
- feeling weak all over, with or without heaviness in arms and legs
- reduced concentration, attention or memory
- reduced motivation or interest in usual activities
- inability to sleep
- feeling tired even after sleep
- feeling depressed, frustrated or irritable due to tiredness
- difficulty completing tasks due to fatigue
- tiredness lasting several hours post-exertion and not recovering with rest

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How do we prevent and/or manage it?

Your health care team will assist in the management of factors which may contribute to fatigue, such as anaemia, pain, shortness of breath, sleep problems or anxiety.

There are key things you can do to manage fatigue:

- ensure you maintain adequate food and fluid intake
- perform gentle exercise, as able
- use complementary therapies including – massage therapy, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, mindfulness based stress reduction
- conserve energy and include rest periods but limit day time naps to 20—30 minutes
- maintain a structured routine that includes going to bed and getting up at the same time each day
- accept help from family/carers/friends

Every patient is different, please discuss your own personal situation with your treating doctor.