

### CANCER-RELATED FATIGUE

## Fact Sheet

#### WHAT IS CANCER-RELATED FATIGUE?

Cancer-related fatigue (CRF) is one of the most common symptoms experienced by patients with, and survivors of, cancer. It is more severe, more distressing and less likely to be relieved by rest than the tiredness or fatigue of daily life.

CRF is defined as *a distressing, persistent, subjective sense of physical, emotional, and/or cognitive tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer or cancer treatment that is not proportional to recent activity and interferes with usual functioning.*<sup>i</sup>

CRF is a symptom of cancer itself, as well as a side effect of the therapies used to treat it. It can affect all aspects of a patient's quality of life, including physically, mentally, emotionally or socially.

#### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF CRF?

Cancer-related fatigue can be quite severe and often comes on suddenly. It is not usually a result of a person's activities or their level of exertion. Some people describe it as feeling weak, drained or washed out.

The following are signs of CRF<sup>ii</sup>:

- Feeling tired and it does not get better with sleep or rest, it keeps coming back, or it becomes severe
- Feeling more tired than usual during or after activity
- Feeling tired and it is not related to an activity
- Arms and legs feel heavy and hard to move
- Having no energy and/or feeling weak
- Spending more time in bed and/or sleeping more and/or having trouble sleeping
- Having trouble concentrating or becoming confused
- Experiencing tiredness that disrupts work, social life or daily routine

## HOW COMMON IS CRF?

Cancer-related fatigue is one of the most common symptoms patients experience, and it affects people with all types of cancer. It can be experienced before and after diagnosis, as well as when a patient is in treatment, has relapsed, or is in remission.

Specific to lymphomas, the 2018 Lymphoma Coalition Global Patient Survey on Lymphomas and CLL found that 72 percent of patients experienced life-impacting fatigue.<sup>iii</sup> The survey also revealed a greater prevalence of CRF in the later stages of lymphomas – relapse, remission and disease transformation – indicating that fatigue may get worse rather than better over time.

## WHAT CAUSES CRF?

The causes of CRF are still not fully understood because CRF is a symptom of the cancer itself, as well as a side effect of many of the therapies used to treat it.

Currently, CRF is thought to be caused by a combination of biological and patient-related factors. Cancer and/or its treatment bring on a series of biological changes that lead to CRF. A patient's own characteristics can also contribute. For example, patients who are older, have an advanced stage cancer, or have had more than one type of treatment are more likely to experience long-term fatigue. Many people also have medical conditions or take medications that are unrelated to cancer but may add to their fatigue.



## CAN CRF BE TREATED?

Treating fatigue as early as possible, either following diagnosis or at the beginning of cancer treatment, can help prevent CRF from becoming a long-term issue.<sup>i</sup>

Patients with mild CRF should receive education and counselling related to CRF. As well, general fatigue management strategies, such as monitoring fatigue and conserving energy, have shown to be helpful.

In addition to education and counselling, patients with moderate to severe fatigue should be assessed to identify and treat any conditions or contributing factors, such as pain, anxiety, sleep disturbances, or other side effects of cancer treatment. If there are not any treatable factors, or if treatment is not working, patients should be referred to one or a combination of CRF-specific therapies based on their health status. These may include:

- Physical activity
- Nutritional consultation and counselling
- Psychoeducation
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) or stress reduction (MBSR)
- Mind-body interventions (yoga)
- Bright white light therapy
- Medications or supplements

After any therapy is introduced, patients must be re-screened and re-evaluated for the presence and severity of fatigue.

For more information about treating CRF, speak to your healthcare team.

- i. Kuiper B. Cancer-related fatigue the problem and a digital solution. Lecture presented at: HNHCP Educational Conference; February 1, 2019; Zurich, Switzerland.
- ii. What Is Cancer-Related Fatigue? Cancer.org. [cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fatigue/what-is-cancer-related-fatigue.html](https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fatigue/what-is-cancer-related-fatigue.html). Published 2019. Accessed June 4, 2020.
- iii. Lymphoma Coalition. 2018 Global Patient Survey. [lymphomacoalition.org/global-information/global-patient-survey/2018](https://lymphomacoalition.org/global-information/global-patient-survey/2018).