

CANCER-RELATED FATIGUE

Frequently Asked Questions

1 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.*ⁱ

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.

2 Is CRF different than being tired?

Yes. Unlike being tired, CRF is usually not related to the amount of rest or sleep, activity levels or exertion. It is a debilitating state of exhaustion that can come on quite unexpectedly and keep the individual from participating in life's activities.

3 What are the signs of CRF?

The following are known signs of CRFⁱⁱ:

- 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

4 Are there emotional or psychosocial effects of CRF?

Yes. In fact, CRF can be caused by and perpetuate negative psychological, social and behavioural factors. Anxiety, fear of cancer recurrence and depression are a few of the factors known to have a compounding effect on CRF. In addition, when patients are experiencing fatigue, they are often unable to fully participate in their work, home and social lives. This can lead to social isolation or changes in relationships, which can cause or worsen anxiety and depression, and in turn worsen CRF. This puts people in a vicious cause-and-effect cycle.

Studies indicate that patients often perceive fatigue to be the most distressing symptom associated with cancer and its treatment.^{iii, iv}

5 How common is CRF? Do a lot of people experience it?

If you are experiencing CRF, you are not alone. It is one of the most common symptoms patients with cancer and survivors of cancer experience. Specific to lymphomas, the 2018 Lymphoma Coalition Global Patient Survey on Lymphomas and CLL found that 72 percent of patients experienced life-impacting fatigue.^v

6 Does CRF only affect people with lymphoma?

No. CRF is something that can affect people with all types of cancer.

7 Does fatigue vary by stage of lymphoma or subtype?

It can. The 2018 Lymphoma Coalition Global Patient Survey on Lymphomas and CLL (LC 2018 GPS) found the prevalence of CRF varied according to lymphoma subtype and the stage of the cancer experience. There was a greater prevalence of CRF reported by patients in the later stages of lymphomas – relapse, remission and disease transformation – indicating that fatigue may get worse rather than better over time.

It is important to note that while these trends exist, the LC 2018 GPS showed fatigue was the most reported physical issue affecting patient quality of life at every step in the patient experience, from those newly-diagnosed to being in remission.

More details can be found in Lymphoma Coalition's report on Cancer-Related Fatigue found at lymphomacoalition.org/images/Cancer_Related_Fatigue_Report_2020.pdf.

8 What factors contribute to CRF?

There are two main categories of factors that contribute to CRF:

- The biological effects of cancer on the body, including, inflammation, changes to immune and stress responses, and impaired hormone and energy production.
- Patient-related factors, including age, other medical conditions and treatment, side effects of different therapies used to treat cancer, and other comorbidities.



9 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.ⁱ

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.

10 If I think I'm experiencing CRF, should I speak to my health team? Who specifically should I talk to?

If you think you are experiencing CRF, it is important to speak to your healthcare team to discuss an assessment and treatment options. All of the members of your health team – including haematologists, oncologists, nurses, allied healthcare professionals and your family doctor – can have an important impact on well-being and help reduce CRF. Treating fatigue as early as possible can help prevent CRF from becoming a long-term issue.ⁱ

11 Where else can I seek support?

Your local lymphoma patient group may have programs for CRF. Find out if the organisation offers one-on-one counselling, peer support or education sessions.

You may also find digital resources that can help manage CRF. For example, *Untire* is a mobile app that uses scientifically proven methods to reduce cancer-related fatigue and improve energy.

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