

This fact sheet was produced by Palliative Care Queensland, the peak organisation for Palliative Care in Queensland, representing the interests and aspirations of all who share the ideal of quality care at the end of life for all. To order additional copies of this fact sheet, or to become a member of Palliative Care Queensland, please contact:

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PCIS is a free telephone information and support service available to all Queenslanders affected by terminal illnesses, including patients, family members, carers and health professionals. PCIS provides emotional support, counselling and general information about Palliative Care and end-of-life services in Queensland. Support is provided by trained professionals who have access to a large database of up-to-date information.

Disclaimer

The information contained in this brochure is for general guidance only and is not clinical advice. All efforts have been taken to ensure that the information provided is accurate and up to date at the time of printing. The information provided is intended to help inform patients and their family. Your healthcare decisions are best made in consultation with your doctor

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**Palliative
Care
Queensland**

About Fatigue and Weakness

Information for Patients and Carers

What is Fatigue?

Fatigue is a very common symptom that can occur in terminally ill patients, including patients with cancer or other chronic conditions. It is usually diagnosed when patients have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Tiring easily;
- Reduced ability to exercise or complete usual activities;
- Generalised weakness;
- Mental fatigue, often with reduced concentration;
- Memory difficulties, or
- Emotional changes, including irritability or getting upset easily.

It is important to remember that in Palliative Care, fatigue can be experienced not only by patients, but by their carers.

Fatigue usually occurs from repeated or prolonged physical and mental effort. In terminally ill patients however, fatigue can also be caused by the disease progress itself or by the treatment that is being received, such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy. Fatigue is a major symptom of many conditions, including; cancer, heart disease, liver disease, kidney disease or psychological disorders such as depression. Fatigue can also be a major side-effect of surgery.

How can you help to reduce your own Fatigue?

One of the most important ways that you can help to reduce your own level of fatigue, is to maintain a healthy balanced diet. If you have special dietary needs, you may like to ask your treating clinician to refer you to a dietician for advice. Simple stimulants such as coffee, chocolate and tea may also help.

Exercise is also important, and you should try to maintain regular gentle exercise. Gently exercise can include:

- walking around the house or the garden;
- sitting at the table with family for meals;
- sitting with visitors in a comfortable chair, or
- walking in a park.

Wherever possible, ensure that you get adequate sleep and rest, and always vary your activities to suit your energy levels.

Carer Fatigue

If you are caring for person with a terminal illness, remember to monitor your own health care needs and to continue to attend your own regular medical checkups and reviews. Think about accepting regular respite assistance whenever you can, even if it is only for a few hours per week. Accepting offers of help from family and friends can be another way of reducing your fatigue and stress.

Can fatigue be helped medically?

It is important that you tell your nurse and doctor if you are suffering from fatigue or weakness, as it is possible for them to determine whether there are any treatable or reversible aspects to your disease, e.g. anaemia, infections, depression, drugs, side effects of treatments. It may be possible for adjustments to be made to your therapy that can reduce your level of fatigue or weakness.

Repeated transfusions are commonly needed to reduce fatigue in blood related cancers or when your bone marrow is not functioning properly. It is important to be aware however that there will come a time when transfusions are no longer effective in managing your fatigue.

Suffering from other symptoms can also increase your level of fatigue or weakness, e.g. pain, nausea or breathlessness. Remember to tell your nurse and doctor so they can help relieve those symptoms.

Do any drugs help?

Various drugs are currently available to manage fatigue and weakness. Depending on your particular diagnosis or situation, these types of drugs may be prescribed by your doctor. Stimulant type drugs have been successfully prescribed by doctors to treat terminally ill patients with fatigue, but only for short periods of time. In most cases, the most successful methods for managing your fatigue will be those described earlier.