Article Series Cancer in AYA

Understanding Fatigue When You’re a Teenager with Cancer

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For teens and adolescents living with cancer, fatigue can be one of the most common symptoms and side effects of treatment.

Unlike typical tiredness that can improve with rest, cancer-related fatigue doesn’t. It can make it hard to keep up with school, maintain friendships, or enjoy activities that once came easily. This can feel especially discouraging during a time of life

when independence and connection with peers are so important.

Fatigue in teens with cancer may be either a symptom of cancer or a side effect of treatment, or a combination of both. Fatigue also may be caused by:

- **Anemia**, which means having a low red blood cell count
- **Tumor-induced metabolic state**, which happens when the cancer uses up energy your body needs
- Other health issues such as **poor nutrition, thyroid issues, pain, insomnia, stress, and depression**

Let your care team know if you're feeling fatigued. They can help evaluate possible causes and recommend solutions, including changes in medication, lifestyle, or diet.

Here are some strategies and Microsteps to consider that may help you manage fatigue. As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Keeping a symptom diary to track the times you feel fatigue. This can help you figure out what might make your fatigue better or worse.

Aiming for small, balanced meals — even when you don’t feel like eating. Fatigue can feel worse if your body isn’t getting the nutrients it needs. Try eating smaller portions more often during the day, especially if you’re dealing with nausea or poor appetite. Include a mix of protein, healthy fats, fruits, and veggies when you can.

Talking to your teachers or tutors at your school about accommodations. Home-based learning, deadline extensions for homework and projects, and support during test-taking or compiling assignments may be available to you.

Planning your time carefully so you can still enjoy things without overdoing it. For example, if you have a party you want to attend in the evening, take it easy earlier in the day.

Connecting with friends virtually when you don’t have the energy for in-person hangouts.
Video calls, group chats, or playing online games together can help you stay close

with friends even if you’re too tired to leave home. Letting your friends know that you still want to be part of things — just in a different way — can help them support you better.

Being specific when discussing your fatigue with your care team. Try avoiding nonspecific statements such as “I’ve been really tired.” Instead, consider saying something like: “I’ve been so tired I couldn’t go to school for three days.”

Checking your environment to see if anything might be making your fatigue worse. Fatigue could be made worse by simple things such as harsh lighting, uncomfortable furniture, or too-hot or too-cold room temperature.

Reaching out to peer support groups. Sharing your feelings and experiences with other young people with cancer may ease the burden.

Doing something every day to build up your energy.
You may not feel much like exercising, but there is evidence that light exercise, such as walking or riding a bike, can help your energy level, improve sleep, lower stress and increase your sense of well-being.

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