

# Coping with Cancer

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*Carol A. Mangone, M.S., C.H.E.S.  
Cancer Prevention and Control*

*WVU Mary Babb Randolph Cancer Center and Appalachia Center Network  
A Program of the National Cancer Institute*

## **Introduction**

Living with cancer is a challenge. You may be a recently diagnosed cancer patient, or you may be in the midst of your treatment. Maybe you have completed your treatment and are ready to get on with your life. At every stage, you find that there are new decisions to make and that you may be dealing with side effects of your treatments. Some common side effects are fatigue, depression, pain, nutritional concerns, and other complications.

## **Fatigue**

Fatigue can be described as a condition that causes distress and decreased ability to function due to a lack of energy. Specific symptoms may be physical, psychological, or emotional. Fatigue may be acute or chronic. Acute fatigue is normal tiredness with occasional fatigue symptoms that begin quickly and last for a short time. Chronic fatigue is long lasting. Fatigue in people who have completed treatment for cancer and who are considered to be disease-free is a different condition than the fatigue experienced by patients receiving therapy. Fatigue may significantly affect the quality of life of cancer survivors. Studies show that some patients continue to have moderate to severe fatigue for up to 18 years after bone marrow transplantation. Long-term therapies such as tamoxifen can also cause fatigue. Long-term follow-up care is important for patients after cancer therapy. Physical causes should be ruled out when trying to determine the cause of fatigue in cancer survivors.

## **Exercise**

Exercise (including light- and moderate-intensity walking programs) helps many people who have cancer or who have survived cancer. People who

exercise may have more physical energy, improved appetite, improved ability to function, improved quality of life, improved outlook, improved sense of well-being, enhanced sense of commitment, and improved ability to meet the challenges of cancer and cancer treatment.

## **Activity and rest**

An activity and rest program can be developed with a health care professional to make the most of a patient's energy. Practicing sleep habits such as not lying down at times other than for sleep, taking short naps no longer than one hour, and limiting distracting noise (television and radio) during sleep may improve sleep and allow more activity during the day.

## **Depression**

It's common to feel depressed by a cancer diagnosis. A certain level of "the blues" is a normal response to any serious illness. However, you may find yourself overwhelmed by feelings of deep sadness and despair. Signs of the medical illness called "clinical depression" include a strong sense of helplessness and gloom, grief, and the feeling that life is meaningless. Some possible symptoms of severe depression are loss of interest in activities that one used to enjoy, eating problems, crying spells, sleep disturbances, decreased or increased physical energy, and suicidal thoughts or behavior.

Someone may experience symptoms like these for other reasons. For example, sometimes the side effects of cancer treatment can cause poor appetite and fatigue. However, if several of these symptoms occur nearly every day, all day, for at least two weeks, check with your doctor. The key to diagnosing clinical depression is how long you've had the symptoms and how severe they are.

Depression often can be treated successfully. Let your doctor know about changes in your mood, appetite, and sleeping patterns. Your doctor may prescribe an antidepressant medicine. It may also be helpful for you to talk about your feelings with a mental health professional or with other cancer patients in a support group.

### **Radiation enteritis**

Radiation enteritis is a malfunction of the large and small bowel that occurs during or after radiation therapy to the abdomen, pelvis, or rectum.

The large and small bowel are very sensitive to radiation. The amount of damage to normal tissues increases as the radiation dose increases. Since larger doses are needed for most tumors in the abdomen and pelvis, enteritis is likely to occur.

Almost all patients undergoing radiation to the abdomen, pelvis, or rectum will show signs of acute enteritis. Acute symptoms are those that appear during the first course of radiation therapy and up to eight weeks later. Chronic radiation enteritis may appear months to years after finishing radiation therapy, or it may begin as acute enteritis and continue after treatment ends.

### **Treatment**

Treatment of acute enteritis includes treating the diarrhea, loss of fluids, poor absorption, and stomach or rectal pain. These symptoms usually get better with medications, changes in diet, and rest.

### **Nutrition**

Nutrition also plays a role in acute enteritis and other side effects from cancer treatment. When intestines are damaged by radiation therapy, production of enzymes, especially lactase, decreases or stops entirely. Lactase is essential in the digestion of milk and milk products. A lactose-free, low-fat, and low-fiber diet may help to control symptoms of acute enteritis.

### *Foods that should be avoided:*

- Milk and milk products (except buttermilk and yogurt). Processed cheese may be tolerated because the lactose is removed in processing. Lactose-free milkshake supplements, such as Ensure, may also be used.
- Whole grain bread and cereal
- Nuts, seeds, and coconut
- Fried, greasy, or fatty foods
- Fresh and dried fruit and some fruit juices, such as prune juice
- Raw vegetables
- Rich pastries
- Popcorn, potato chips, and pretzels
- Strong spices and herbs
- Chocolate, coffee, tea, and soft drinks with caffeine
- Alcohol and tobacco

### *Foods that are recommended:*

- Fish, poultry, and meat that is cooked, broiled, or roasted
- Bananas, applesauce, peeled apples, and apple and grape juices
- White bread and toast
- Macaroni and noodles

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