

# Coping with Fatigue

Caring for people with cancer

## Coping with

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# Fatigue

Fatigue is when you feel very tired most or all of the time. This booklet has information on:

- Causes of fatigue
- Ways of treating fatigue
- Tips to help you manage fatigue

### Useful numbers

Specialist nurse

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Family doctor (GP)

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Medical oncologist

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Radiation oncologist

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Surgeon

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Medical social worker

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Emergency



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# Fast facts

## What is fatigue?

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Fatigue is when you lack energy and feel very tired or sometimes totally exhausted. You may get tired quickly and not feel better after resting and sleeping. You may find it hard to do simple, everyday things.

Fatigue is considered the most common symptom of having cancer, and for some people the most distressing.

## What causes fatigue?

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Lots of people experience fatigue during and after their cancer treatment. It can be caused by cancer itself or the side-effects of treatment. For example, chemotherapy can lower your red blood cell count (anaemia), which can make you feel very tired. And radiotherapy itself can cause fatigue, as well as travelling to and from appointments.

## How long does it last?

It varies from person to person, and also depends on what's causing it. Sometimes fatigue improves soon after treatment, but some people still feel tired for months or even years after their cancer treatment has ended. Fatigue can also develop some time after treatment.

## How is fatigue treated?

There are lots of things that can be done to improve fatigue, but it depends on what's causing it. For example, if you're not sleeping well, and perhaps feeling anxious, support from others, advice from healthcare professionals and possibly medication may improve things. If you have anaemia, a blood transfusion should help you feel better.

## How can I help myself?

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If you're suffering from fatigue, it's always best to tell your GP or medical team so they can find out the reason for it. But there are things you can do to help yourself. For example, research has shown that taking some exercise may help.

## We're here for you

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If you or your family have any questions or worries, want to know where to get support, or if you just need to talk, you can talk to one of our cancer nurses.

### Ways to get in touch

- Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700
  - Drop in to a Daffodil Centre  
Email [daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie](mailto:daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie) to find your local Daffodil Centre
  - Email us: [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)
- See page 58 for more about our services.



## Reading this booklet



This booklet is to help you throughout your cancer treatment and afterwards. You will probably find different sections useful at different times, so keep it for reference. If you need more information or don't understand something, ask your doctor or nurse. You can also ask one of our cancer nurses:

- Call our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700
- Visit a Daffodil Centre
- Email the nurses at [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)



Cancer Nurseline Freephone 1800 200 700

## About fatigue

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## What is fatigue?

Fatigue means feeling extremely tired most or all of the time. Often it is not relieved by rest. Fatigue is a very common symptom of cancer and can build up over the course of your treatment. The tiredness usually eases off once you've finished treatment.

## How do I know if I have fatigue?

About 3 out of 4 patients will feel fatigued at some stage. Fatigue can affect people in different ways. Here are some ways it may affect you:

- You feel as if you have no energy and could spend whole days in bed.
- You cannot complete even small tasks. Brushing your hair, showering or cooking can seem impossible.
- You still feel tired after resting or having a full night's sleep.
- You have trouble thinking, speaking or making decisions.
- You find it difficult to remember things.
- You find it hard to concentrate – this can make it hard to work and do other things you enjoy, like reading or watching TV.
- You feel breathless after only light activity. You may feel dizzy or lightheaded.
- You have trouble getting to sleep (insomnia).
- You lose your sex drive.
- You feel sad and depressed. Anxiety and depression are commonly associated with fatigue.
- You feel impatient or irritable with friends, family and other people around you.
- You have no energy for socialising.

Some people find that their fatigue is very mild and does not interfere much with their daily life. But for others it is very disruptive. You may feel overwhelmed by the effect fatigue has on you. It can often reduce your enjoyment of life. Feeling tired all the time is especially difficult when you are already coping with cancer.

The different levels of fatigue are described in the fatigue diary at the back of this booklet.

Fatigue may be due to the cancer itself or as a result of symptoms caused by the cancer. It can also be a side-effect of treatment. There's more about possible causes on page 13.

It's important not to compare yourself to other people with cancer. Cancer and its treatment affect people in very different ways.

### What to do if you're feeling fatigued

- **Tell your doctor / cancer nurse** – treating the causes of fatigue can help to reduce it. See the next page for some tips on talking about your fatigue.
- **Look after yourself** – get plenty of rest, try to do some exercise and eat well. Remember, daytime naps may help energise you, but limit these to less than an hour to avoid disturbing your night's sleep.
- **Plan your days to make things easier.** See page 27 for advice on planning your time.
- **Let other people help you** if you're feeling tired.

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## Talking to doctors about your fatigue

If you're feeling fatigued, it's important to tell your medical team. Give them as much information as possible about your symptoms and how fatigue is affecting you.

*Health professionals caring for people with cancer understand how distressing and disabling fatigue is.*

Fatigue can happen for many different reasons. The best treatment for your fatigue will depend on what's causing it. See page 13 for information on causes of fatigue.

### Tips for talking to doctors and nurses

- Make a note of everyday actions that you find difficult, such as climbing stairs, cooking, showering, talking for a period of time, concentrating on reading/watching TV and remembering things.
- If you have kept a fatigue diary you can bring it along to share with the medical team looking after you (see page 69).
- Talk about your emotions and how you're feeling in yourself. It can be hard to discuss your emotions, especially when you are ill. You might worry that you will get upset or upset other people. But because fatigue can affect your emotions, it's important to talk about them too.
- You might find it helpful to write down the questions you want to ask your doctor or nurse about fatigue. There's a list of some questions you might like to ask on page 66.
- Try not to feel rushed and make sure you understand everything before you leave. Ask them to explain again if you didn't understand the first time.

- Write down the answers if you like. It may also help to bring someone with you to your appointment, to give you support and help you to remember what the doctor says.
- Make sure you have a number and email address so you can contact your doctor or nurse if you have any further questions.



## What causes fatigue?

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There are many causes of fatigue. It can often be associated with other side-effects and symptoms. It's important to try and find out what is causing fatigue so that you and your medical team can find ways to relieve it. Possible causes of fatigue include:

## Cancer treatments

### Surgery

It can take quite a while to recover from surgery. You may feel tired and need to take things easy for a while.

This type of fatigue is usually temporary. But some types of surgery may cause ongoing problems with fatigue. For example, surgery to your stomach may lead to problems with absorbing food. If you are unable to absorb nutrients from food this can affect your energy levels.

### Chemotherapy and radiotherapy

You may feel very tired during and after chemotherapy and radiotherapy. This can be due to the treatment itself – for example, these treatments can cause anaemia (see page 16). Travelling to and from the hospital can also drain your energy. Fatigue can build up over the course of treatment, so you may feel more tired towards the end of your treatment and even for a number of weeks after your treatment finishes.

Your energy levels should start to improve 6 months to a year after treatment. But some people still feel tired for years after their cancer treatment has ended.

### Hormone therapy

Hormone therapy works by blocking hormones that can encourage some cancers to grow. This treatment may make you feel tired. Hormone therapies can also cause joint pain, hot flushes, night sweats and trouble sleeping, which can make you feel more tired.

Hormone therapy can be given for several years, so it is important to talk to your doctor or nurse if you are feeling fatigued. Sometimes the treatment can be changed or altered to help with side-effects, including fatigue.

### Targeted therapies

Some targeted therapies can cause a flu-like reaction or tiredness after treatment. They can cause considerable levels of fatigue.

These side-effects usually go away when treatment stops or soon afterwards. Talk to your doctor or nurse. They will explain your treatment to you and show you how to reduce the side-effects.

### Anaemia

Anaemia is a common cause of fatigue in people with cancer. It is caused by a shortage of haemoglobin (Hb) and oxygen in your bloodstream. The red blood cells, which contain haemoglobin, carry oxygen to all the cells of your body to provide energy. If the number of red blood cells is low, the amount of oxygen reaching your cells is reduced.

If you have anaemia, you might:

- Feel breathless some or all of the time. You may also feel dizzy and lightheaded
- Lose interest in sex
- Find that you cannot get or maintain an erection (men)
- Have trouble getting to sleep
- Have aching muscles and joints
- Have chest pain due to heart problems (angina)
- Feel terribly tired and lethargic
- Have difficulty walking any distance, or going upstairs

If you feel very tired, it's important to tell your doctor or nurse.



### Causes of anaemia

Chemotherapy can reduce the number of red blood cells that are made. This is a common cause of anaemia.

Red blood cells are made in the bone marrow. Radiotherapy can also cause anaemia if it's given to an area of the body that contains bone marrow. Radiotherapy given to the breastbone (sternum), the hip bones, or the long bones of the arms and legs is most likely to reduce the production of red blood cells.

You will have regular blood tests to check your haemoglobin if you have cancer or are having cancer treatment.

You can use the fatigue diary at the back of this booklet to record your haemoglobin levels. Over time you will see how this affects your everyday life and level of fatigue. You may find that you feel much more tired when your haemoglobin is low. If you feel very tired tell your doctor or nurse. They may be able to treat the anaemia. This can reduce the fatigue and help you to feel better.

### How is anaemia treated?

If you have mild anaemia, you might just need a course of iron tablets. You may also need to eat more foods rich in iron and vitamin C. Your doctor or nurse will give you advice on your diet.

With more severe anaemia, your doctor may decide to give you a blood transfusion or erythropoietin therapy.

A blood transfusion gives red blood cells directly into your bloodstream (through a drip). This will quickly increase the number of red blood cells travelling around your body.

Erythropoietin is a natural hormone which helps make red blood cells. Man-made versions of erythropoietin are available. They can be given to raise your level of red blood cells and reduce feelings of fatigue, if you are having chemotherapy.

## Electrolyte imbalance

Electrolytes are salts and minerals, such as sodium, potassium, chloride and bicarbonate, which are found in the blood. Symptoms of an electrolyte imbalance can include fatigue. An electrolyte test can help find out if there's an electrolyte imbalance in the body.

### How is an electrolyte imbalance treated?

Treatment for an electrolyte imbalance will depend on which electrolyte is out of balance and by how much. Your doctor will be able to help you if you have an electrolyte imbalance. They may recommend supplements or infusions into a vein.

## Eating difficulties

Cancer and its treatment can cause eating difficulties, which can make it hard to eat well. For example:

- Poor appetite
- Taste and smell changes
- Sore mouth, gums or throat
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty swallowing
- Feeling full
- Nausea
- Vomiting

If you're eating less or not absorbing your food properly (for example, if you're vomiting or have diarrhoea), you may not be getting enough energy and nutrition from your food and may feel weak and tired.



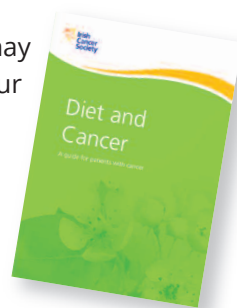
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Tell your doctor or nurse if you're having any eating difficulties.

### Tips on coping with eating problems

Tell your medical team if you're having any problems. There are ways to improve most eating difficulties. For example, there are medicines to help with nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, and special build-up diets and prescription drinks to help keep up your energy and strength. Your doctor or the hospital dietitian can give you advice about these.

There are also things you can do yourself, which may help. See page 36 for tips on eating well, or read our booklet, *Diet and Cancer*. It has helpful tips on coping with eating problems caused by cancer or its treatment. For a free copy, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre or download one from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)



## Pain

Pain can cause fatigue. If you are in pain, tell your doctor or nurse about it straight away. Be honest about the level of pain you are in. There is no need to suffer in silence or play down the amount of pain that you have.

Surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy can all help to ease your pain. There are also a lot of good painkillers available today. If the medication does not kill the pain, tell your doctor or nurse. They may need to try out different painkillers to find one that suits you best.

If you are in pain, tell your doctor or nurse about it straight away.

There are other ways to treat pain such as nerve blocks and epidural injections. If you need more information, ask your doctor or nurse or call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700. For tips to cope with pain, see our website, [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

Complementary therapies such as acupuncture, reflexology and massage may also help you to deal with pain. Talk to your doctor if you are considering complementary therapy, to see what is safe and suitable for you. Many cancer support services offer complementary therapies free of charge. See [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) for your local cancer support centre.

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## Medication

Your doctor may prescribe medication to control pain or reduce the side-effects of treatment. Some of these drugs may cause fatigue or make you feel drowsy. Ask your doctor what side-effects you can expect before you start any new medication. Fatigue or drowsiness usually wear off after a few days. But if the fatigue carries on tell your doctor or nurse, as your medication can be changed.

## Insomnia

Insomnia means you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep for 3 or more nights in the week over a long period of time. This can make it hard to concentrate and stay awake during the day and to do normal daily activities. Insomnia may be linked to side-effects of your cancer treatment, such as hot flushes from hormonal treatment or chemotherapy. But there are many reasons why people with cancer can have difficulty sleeping – such as worry about their illness or finances. Looking for causes may help you and your doctor or nurse find ways to help you get regular, good-quality sleep. You could also try the tips on page 42.

## Other symptoms

Cancer may cause other symptoms such as breathlessness or fluid retention. These symptoms are common causes of fatigue. If you have an infection or fever, your body needs more energy and this may lead to fatigue.

## Other medical conditions

It is possible that you may have a medical problem unrelated to your cancer. For example, diabetes, a cardiac (heart) problem or an underactive thyroid can cause fatigue or make your fatigue worse.

## Treating symptoms

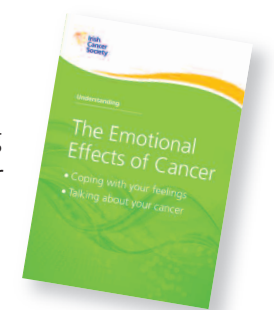


Treating the different symptoms that are causing or contributing to fatigue can often help to relieve it. It is important to let your doctor or nurse know about any symptoms that you have.

## Psychological causes of fatigue

Anxiety, depression, stress and tension can all contribute to fatigue. You may find that you have trouble getting to sleep. You may feel anxious or depressed when you are first diagnosed with cancer. These feelings are a normal part of the cancer journey, and many people experience them. They generally become easier to manage as you adjust to your illness. You may find it useful to share how you feel with your partner, family or a close friend. If your mood continues to be low most of the time, you may need help to overcome depression. This kind of depression is usually a reactive depression and normally occurs for just a short period of time. Talk to your doctor. He or she can refer you to a counsellor or prescribe medication if they think that would be helpful.

The Irish Cancer Society has a booklet, ***Understanding the Emotional Effects of Cancer***, which can help you to cope with your feelings. It also suggests ways of recognising and dealing with depression. For a free copy, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre or download one from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)





## Coping with fatigue

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## Planning

### Be kind to yourself

If you're suffering with fatigue you may not be able to do everything you used to do. You should not feel guilty or annoyed that you cannot achieve all you want to – remember, your energy will return. It may help to adjust your routine and plan your day so that you are able to do the things you want to do most, and also have time to rest. Don't overburden yourself by planning to do too much in any one day.

### Energy levels

Keep a note of your energy levels during the day. Do this by taking time to check yourself and listen to your body. Use the fatigue diary pages at the end of the booklet to write down the times when you feel at your best and when you feel most tired. This will help you to plan your activities depending on your energy levels. It is also important to pace your activities, and try and not to do too much in one go.

It may be helpful early on to decide which activities you are prepared to give up. Remember not to use up all of your energy on doing tasks. Try to find time each day to do something you enjoy.



## Rest and sleep

Pace yourself and plan enough rest and sleep periods. It makes sense to plan a period of rest after a period of activity. You may find that you need to rest after meals too. Short naps (less than an hour) and rest periods are useful, as long as they don't stop you from sleeping at night.

## Exercise

If you're able to do some exercise, try to make time in your day for an activity such as walking. It may feel like the last thing you want to do, but physical activity has been shown to improve fatigue. Also, people generally feel more energised and in better form after taking some exercise. Pick an activity you enjoy – it doesn't have to be a sport – any activity that gets you moving more is good. See page 37 for tips on exercise, getting advice, how to get started and how to exercise safely.

## Planning around your treatment

It's also important to plan your days around your treatment. Try to avoid anything energetic or stressful for 24 hours before and after your treatments, or if you have low blood counts.

## Accept help

Doing things for yourself is important – we have some tips to help you manage better in the next few pages – but it's important not to feel guilty if you have to ask for help. It will only be for a short period of time.

## Managing day to day

### Everyday tasks

If you're feeling fatigued, you probably won't have the energy to do everything you did before. But there are ways to make things a bit easier, see below.

### Hints & Tips – Everyday tasks



- Ask your family, friends and neighbours to help you around the house, with travelling to hospital, with your children or with the cooking and shopping.
- Talk to your medical social worker and find out what support services are available.
- Spread tasks out over the week, and decide which ones need doing the most.
- Do a little bit each day rather than a lot in one go. Don't plan to do too much each day.
- Ask others to do heavy work where possible.
- Employ a cleaner. If you can't afford one, talk to your medical social worker or public health nurse. You may be entitled to a home help.
- Use a wheeled shopping bag to carry supplies and groceries.
- Sit down to do whatever chores you can.
- Ask someone to take out your rubbish bags.



## Shopping

Do your shopping on the internet and have it delivered, if possible. Or ask others to do the shopping for you. If you cannot, or would rather do the shopping yourself, these suggestions may help:

### Hints & Tips – Shopping



- Make a list before you start. It can be hard to remember all that you need when you go to the shops.
- Write the shopping list following the layout of the shop to save you walking too much. For example, if the first area of the shop is fruit and vegetables, put these items on your list first.
- Ask someone to go shopping with you. Get a lift to and from the shops.
- Use the shopping trolley for support. Avoid lifting heavy items.
- Stock up on household items you use regularly. Do this when you feel less tired or have someone to help you with the extra shopping.
- Stock up on nutritious food that is easy to prepare for the times you don't have the energy for cooking.
- Ask for help in the supermarket with packing your bags and carrying groceries to the car, or ask for home delivery.
- Shop at less busy times.

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## Laundry

If you live with other people ask them to do their own washing and ironing. If this is not possible, do a small amount of washing and ironing each day.



### Hints & Tips – Laundry



- Use a trolley where possible to move your washing to and from the washing machine.
- Get help to hang out the washing.
- Use a lightweight iron.
- Iron essential items only.
- Sit down to iron.
- Slide the iron onto a heatproof pad to avoid lifting.

## Meal preparation

Try cooking simpler meals. There is a large range of nutritious ready-made meals available in most supermarkets. Also stock up on pre-prepared foods such as vegetables and fruit bowls. These are useful for when you are especially tired. Ask members of your family to have their main meal during the day, if possible, when they are at work or at school.

### Hints & Tips – Cooking & food preparation

- Prepare meals when you're feeling less tired.
- Make up double portions so that you can freeze half for another time.
- Sit down and avoid bending and stretching when preparing meals.
- Don't lift heavy pans or dishes off the hob or out of the oven. Ask others to move heavy items to the table.
- Line grill pans with foil to cut down on cleaning. Use oven dishes you can serve from, to save washing up. Let dishes soak rather than scrubbing them and leave dishes to dry. Use a dishwasher if you have one and ask others to load and unload it.

## Caring for your children

One of the worst aspects of fatigue is feeling that you are letting your family down. This can be even more upsetting when you have children – but you should try not to feel guilty about this. There are many things that may help.

### Hints & Tips – Childcare



- Explain to your children that you are feeling tired and cannot do as much with them as you could, but that you will again. You may be surprised at how well they respond.
- Plan activities with your children that can be done sitting down. Reading a book, drawing or colouring, doing a puzzle, or simply watching a favourite television programme together are ideal ways to spend time with your children.
- Go to places where you can sit down while your children enjoy themselves.
- Avoid lifting smaller children. Use a pram or buggy if you have to transport them.
- Ask your children to help you with light jobs around the house.
- Accept offers from others to take your children to and from school or help with childcare.
- Get babysitters in from time to time so you can do some of the things you enjoy doing.

## At work

During or after cancer treatment you may need to reduce your hours or stop working altogether. Fatigue may affect the time it takes to go back to work. It can help to talk to your employer, human resource manager or occupational health department. Let them know that you may need some time off due to the cancer or its treatment. Don't feel that you have to work if you are too tired.

Some people find that their tiredness is mild and does not interfere much with their work. Others find that it has a greater impact. For example, you may find it hard to concentrate or make decisions. This can affect the quality of your work. Fatigue can also change the way you think and feel, and this can affect your relationships with your colleagues. If you do want to carry on working, you may be able to find ways of making your work less tiring.



## Hints & Tips – Managing fatigue at work

- Talk to your employer about how you can plan and prioritise your work for when you feel less tired.
- Identify aspects of your work that may be too draining and ask your employer if these can be put on hold or given to another colleague. If necessary, ask about a short-term change of duties.
- Where possible, extend deadlines and ask colleagues to help you with some of your work.
- Keep regular notes to remind you of what work you need to get done that day.
- Keep a diary of your energy levels throughout the day. You may notice that there are times when you are more productive without too much effort.
- Discuss the possibility of flexible or reduced working hours or working from home.
- Let colleagues know how you will manage your work, how to contact you and when you will check in with them.
- Plan short breaks every now and then to rest.
- Talk to your occupational health adviser if you have one. They have a duty to support you doing your job and help you with any health problems that may affect your work.

If you cannot continue working or are self-employed, it may be useful to talk to the Department of Social Protection. You may be entitled to claim certain benefits. See page 56 for more information.

## Eating and drinking

If you have problems eating you may begin to lose weight. This may be due to the cancer or your treatment. Sometimes when you are weak or tired you can also lose interest in your food. It is best to try to eat as well as you can. This will help you increase your energy and avoid getting run down. Here are some suggestions that might help.

### Hints & Tips – Eating and drinking



- Tell your doctor if you're losing weight or finding it hard to eat – for example, if you don't have much appetite or you have side-effects that are affecting your ability to eat well.
- Keep a diary of what and when you eat every day.
- If you have taste changes or find that some foods no longer appeal to you, try new foods, or eat the foods that taste best.
- Ask for help in preparing your meals.
- Try eating little and often. Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day. Try to have some protein and carbohydrate foods every day, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Eat when you feel hungry.
- If you do not feel like eating, ask your doctor or dietitian about build-up drinks.
- Ask to see a dietitian if you have any eating difficulties. He or she can keep an eye on your weight and give you advice on the best foods to eat.

Our booklet, *Diet and Cancer*, has advice on coping with eating difficulties. For a free copy, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700, visit a Daffodil Centre or download one from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

## Exercise

Research has shown that there are many benefits to exercise:

- It helps to reduce the symptoms of fatigue, the side-effects of cancer treatments, and improves your overall quality of life.
- It keeps and improves your physical abilities and prevents your muscles wasting due to inactivity.
- Regular exercise builds up your physical fitness level, improves your energy, strength, balance, stamina and co-ordination.
- Regular exercise along with a healthy diet can help reduce the risk of breast cancer and bowel cancer coming back. It can also help you keep a healthy weight and heart.
- Light exercise encourages your body to release endorphins. These are often called 'feel good hormones'. When released, they can lift your mood and sense of wellbeing. So even a short walk is a good place to start.

Try to exercise a little both during and after cancer treatment if you're able to, even if you don't feel like it. Your doctor can give you advice about what is suitable and safe for you. If exercise is impossible, try to remain as active as you can in your daily routine.



### Get advice before you start

Your doctor, specialist nurse or physiotherapist can all give you advice. You might also be referred to a physical activity programme (see page 41).

**Doctor or specialist nurse:** Ask your doctor or nurse for advice before starting or increasing the amount of exercise you take. They can advise you on the type and amount of exercise that is safe for you, while considering any other medical conditions you might have. The amount you do will depend on your type of cancer, your treatments, and your general fitness level.

**Physiotherapist:** The physiotherapist at the hospital can advise you about which exercises would suit you best. They can offer advice on how to get started with exercising, ways to improve your balance and ways to strengthen your hands, arms or legs. The physiotherapist can offer tips on how to manage fatigue and teach you other exercises to meet your needs.

Check with your local cancer support centre – it may have an exercise programme suitable for you, such as yoga or aerobics.



### How to get started

If you're able to exercise, start gradually, especially if you weren't taking regular exercise before your cancer diagnosis. Regular exercise usually means 30 minutes of moderate activity at least 3–5 times a week. Moderate activity means your heart rate will increase but you're not so out of breath that you can't talk. You can build up gradually. For example, you might like to break up the 30 minutes into three 10-minute sessions.

Some cancer support centres offer exercise sessions – for example tai chi, pilates or yoga. Walking is also a great way to get more active and enjoy getting some fresh air. Set yourself some achievable goals, while pacing yourself and listening to how your body feels. For example, try to walk a little further or exercise a little more every day or every week. Don't overdo it – alternate small amounts of activity with rest. This allows your muscles time to recover after activity.

Recording your achievements in a diary can also help you to check your progress. Overall, make sure the exercises are safe, work well and are enjoyable.

### Simple ways to keep active:

- Go for a walk or a cycle.
- Do some gardening.
- Take the stairs instead of the lift.
- Get off the bus a few stops before your destination or park a little way away from where you're going and walk the rest of the way.

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## Hints & Tips – exercise safely



- Exercise on a flat surface and avoid exercises that might increase your risk of falling or injuring yourself.
- Make sure you drink enough water during and after exercise to prevent dehydration.
- Wear well-fitting supportive shoes like laced flat shoes or trainers.
- If your immune system is low (for example, after chemotherapy), you're more likely to get infections, so it's best to avoid swimming pools and to use the gym when it's not busy until your immune system has recovered.
- If you're having or have recently had radiotherapy, swimming in chlorinated water might irritate your skin.
- If you're anaemic or have low platelets, ask your doctor for advice before starting. (Anaemia affects your oxygen levels. Platelets help your blood to clot.)
- If you get chest pain, dizziness, nausea, difficulty breathing or a racing heart, stop the exercise and tell your doctor.
- Don't exercise if you feel unwell, are breathless, in pain, or have any symptom that worries you. Discuss it with your doctor.
- If you have lymphoedema, continue to wear compression garments during exercises.
- Avoid high-impact exercises or contact activities if you have bone secondaries or osteoporosis.

## Physical activity programmes

You might be able to take part in a supervised group exercise programme. For example, the Irish Cancer Society *Strides for Life* exercise programme. Your doctor or nurse may refer you to a programme.

The programmes can be a good source of support as well as being sociable. Exercising with other people can also motivate you to get and remain active safely.

Before you start, your trainer will explain the benefits and risks of increasing your physical activity. After that, you may be asked to give your written consent. The fitness trainer will match the types of exercises to your individual needs, bearing in mind your current fitness level. They will then support you throughout the programme.

Your nearest cancer support centre may run a physical activity programme or have information about one in your area. Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 to find your nearest cancer support centre or see our online directory at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)



## Sleeping well

Sleeping well at night may help to reduce fatigue and your need to sleep during the day. The following tips may help you to get into a good sleep routine.

### Relax before going to bed

Give yourself at least half an hour to relax before going to bed. Set aside any work, avoid being overstimulated and slow down the pace. Read a book, listen to relaxing music or watch some light television. Try not to use technology for at least an hour before bedtime. Go to bed when you feel sleepy.

### Sleep just long enough

Limiting time in bed seems to produce better quality sleep. Sleep as long as you need to feel refreshed and healthy during the following day.

### Wake up at the same time every day

A regular wake-up time in the morning may strengthen your sleep routine. It may eventually lead to a regular time of getting to sleep.

### Exercise regularly if you can

A steady daily amount of exercise may help to deepen sleep over the long term. This is best done during the day rather than in the hours close to bedtime. See page 37 for more about exercise.

### Eliminate noise

Occasional loud noises, such as aircraft flying overhead, can disturb sleep. If your bedroom is noisy, you could mask some of the noise using a small electric fan, or you could use earplugs.

### Keep a steady temperature in your bedroom

If your bedroom is too hot or too cold it might disturb your sleep. The room temperature should be comfortably warm.

## Keep your bedroom for sleep

If you have a TV or computer in your bedroom, it might help to remove it. This helps to create a calm relaxing space and keeps noise and stimulation to a low level. Turn off your mobile phone and other electronic devices, and avoid working or eating in bed.

**Sleeping well is very important and may help to reduce fatigue.**

### Be comfortable

Make sure your bedding and nightwear are comfortable. It can help to use 100 per cent cotton fabric for both bedding and nightwear, especially if you are having hot flushes or night sweats. Your bedroom should also be kept dark to help you sleep.

### Have a bedtime snack

Hunger can often disturb sleep. A light bedtime snack, warm milk or a hot drink might help you to sleep better. But try to avoid eating a heavy meal or spicy food in the hours close to bedtime.

### Avoid stimulants

Many poor sleepers are very sensitive to stimulants. It is best to avoid cola drinks, coffee, strong tea and chocolate after 4pm.

### Know how naps affect you

Some people find that daytime naps help them sleep better at night, while others sleep less well after them. Find out what suits you best. Ideally you should not nap for longer than an hour. If possible, take your nap in the earlier part of the day.

### Limit your intake of alcohol

If you are feeling tense, alcohol can help you to fall asleep more quickly, but the sleep tends to be broken. So avoid large amounts of alcohol near bedtime. Remember, alcohol is a depressant, so it can also affect your mood.

### Keep a notebook and pen beside your bed

If you wake at night worrying or your thoughts are racing, write down your thoughts in a notebook and give yourself permission to let them go until the morning. Then if you wish, you can work through them the next day with the support and advice of others.

### Know when to say 'enough'

Rather than lying in bed tossing and turning you could also get up and watch television or read a book. Wait until you feel tired again and then go back to bed. Audiobooks may help you to sleep. These are available online and in most public libraries or bookshops. Mental exercises can also help you to sleep. These usually take about 10 minutes and include:

- Trying to remember the lines of a poem or song
- Making alphabetical lists of girls' or boys' names, countries, trees or flowers
- Recalling a favourite experience in every detail
- Writing mental letters
- Relaxation exercises

Your body will still benefit from lying quietly in bed, resting, even if you are not actually asleep. It can help to turn the clock face away from you or put it in a drawer. 'Clock watching' can often make things worse. Although you might feel as if you have been awake all night, you may well have managed to have several hours of good-quality sleep.

### Relaxation

It is very important that you make time for activities that relax you. Stress uses up energy and might make you tired. It is natural to feel more stressed than usual when you start your cancer treatment. The following suggestions may help you to relax:

- **Talk to others about anything that is worrying you.** You may find it difficult to talk to your family and friends. Ask your doctor to refer you to a counsellor if you think it would be helpful.
- **If medical information makes you anxious, ask a friend or relative to get the information and tell you anything important.** Avoid reading up about your condition from non-medical sources on the internet. They are not always correct and may make you feel more anxious.
- **Try to take your mind off your worries by reading, seeing friends and listening to music,** such as classical or relaxation music, that promotes sleep.
- **Do some light exercise such as walking.**
- **Try to avoid situations that make you anxious.**
- **Keep a journal or attend a support group.** Either of these can help you deal with your emotions while also empowering and supporting you.

Many people find it difficult to unwind, especially if the stresses and strains of the day are difficult to forget. Relaxation techniques can help to relieve tension.



## Types of relaxation exercises

- **Physical exercises** that help to relieve tension in your body
- **Mental exercises** that help to relax your mind

You will get the most benefit from these techniques if you practise them for 5–10 minutes each day. Just experiment until you find the best one for you. Some examples are:

- Body awareness – concentrating on different parts of your body
- Mindfulness or meditation
- Progressive muscle relaxation – tensing and relaxing each part of your body in turn (see the next page)
- Breathing exercises
- Imagery exercises
- Relaxation CDs or online resources, such as videos or apps.  
For example, music or natural sounds such as birdsong and rippling streams

If you want to learn relaxation techniques, a guided relaxation or online meditation video or CD can be a good place to start. There are many relaxation resources available online.

You may also be able to learn relaxation techniques at sessions run by your local cancer support centre. For example, mindfulness or meditation. Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 to find your nearest cancer support centre or see our online directory at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

You can also ask at the hospital if there's a nurse or other health therapist who can advise you about techniques and recommend a reliable, trusted therapist – for example, cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT) and bright white light therapy may help to improve fatigue.

## Relaxation technique – progressive muscle relaxation



Before you begin this technique, create a peaceful space. Find a quiet comfortable room, turn off your phone and make sure that you will not be disturbed for 10 or 15 minutes. Turn on some relaxing music, light a candle and burn your favourite scented oil if you wish. You might also want to dim the lights.

### When you are ready:

- Sit or lie on a comfortable well-supported chair, couch or bed.
- Close your eyes if you wish.
- Take deep breaths – in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Place your hands over your tummy. When you breathe in, your tummy should rise, pushing your hands up. This is called abdominal breathing.
- Practise breathing like this a few times. Starting with the muscles in your feet and working upwards, tense (squeeze) each muscle group for 10 seconds. Then let it go so that it feels relaxed and heavy.
- Work your way up through your body including your back, shoulders, neck and forehead. Finish with your arms and hands. If a part of your body is injured, leave it out.
- When your whole body feels relaxed, continue to focus on your breathing.
- Lie for a few minutes in relaxation and stillness.
- When you are ready to finish, slowly open your eyes, wriggle your toes and stretch a little.
- Allow yourself to become aware of your surroundings again.

## Drug treatments for fatigue

If your fatigue is severe, a short course of sleeping tablets might help. It can help get you back into a pattern of sleeping properly.

If you are finding it hard to sleep because of depression, your doctor might suggest antidepressants. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you feel depressed.

Pain can also worsen your fatigue – your doctor may advise you to take regular painkillers for a time.

Steroid drugs can sometimes be helpful. You should discuss when you might need to take them and possible benefits and disadvantages with your doctor.

## Cancer and complementary therapies

Some people with cancer find it helpful to try complementary therapies to help them cope with side-effects such as fatigue. For example, some people say that massage, relaxation techniques, mindfulness and yoga help improve their fatigue.

### What are complementary therapies?

Complementary therapies are treatments that can be given in addition to standard medical treatment to help you feel better in yourself. Examples of complementary therapies are yoga, meditation, acupuncture, aromatherapy and massage.

### If you want to try complementary therapies

Talk to your doctor or nurse before trying complementary therapies, even if you used them safely in the past. Some therapies might not be suitable for people with certain cancers or having certain treatments. For example, acupuncture may not be suitable if your white blood cell count is low and herbal medications and supplements may interfere with your treatment.

## More information

Our booklet *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies* has more information on different methods and tips on staying safe. You can get a free copy by calling our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or by visiting a Daffodil Centre. You can also read it on our website, [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

Check with your local cancer support centre – many offer complementary therapies free of charge to people who are having or have had cancer treatments.



## Advice for carers

### Looking after someone who has fatigue

Looking after someone who has fatigue may not be easy. You may feel tired with all the worry and the extra work. It can be a real strain for you to adapt to a new way of life.

Find out as much as you can about the illness and its treatment. Ask to speak to a medical social worker about the community services that are available. Do this before your loved one is discharged from hospital, if possible. Also ask for a contact name and telephone number at the hospital so that you can talk to someone if you have a problem.

### Looking after yourself

Caring for someone can be tiring. But it is important that you look after yourself so you can continue to support your loved one. Eat nutritious meals and don't overdo things. Ask family or friends to help you so you can have some time for yourself each week. This can be hard when you have a lot to do and do not want to let your loved one down. It might help to involve other people and organisations with the caring so that you both do not become too tired. If you're worried or upset, it might help to call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 and speak in confidence with a cancer nurse. You will also find useful information for carers on our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

Email: [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)

## Hints & Tips – carers



- Read the information in this booklet. It will help you find ways to manage your own fatigue and that of your relative or friend who has cancer.
- Write down the impact of fatigue on their daily life. Make a note of the time of day fatigue is at its worst.
- Write down the impact of fatigue on your daily life.
- If possible, go with them on their visits to hospital. Discuss the impact of fatigue on your lives.
- Talk to the doctors and nurses about things you tried to help reduce fatigue.
- Discuss what could be causing the fatigue.
- Fill in the fatigue diary on page 69 and discuss it with the doctors or nurses.
- Look through the diary with your loved one to find the pattern of fatigue.
- Identify times for activities when your relative or friend has more energy.




## Support resources

Coping with the financial impact of cancer 55

Irish Cancer Society services 58

Local cancer support services 64

## Coping with the financial impact of cancer

- 
- If you have cancer you may not be able to work for a time. You may also have extra expenses.
  - You may have to pay for some of your cancer treatment.
  - You might be entitled to certain social welfare payments.
  - There are services to help you if you're finding it hard to manage.

A diagnosis of cancer often means that you will have extra expenses, like car parking during hospital visits, medication, travel, heating and childcare costs. If you can't work or you are unemployed, this may cause even more stress. It may be harder for you to deal with cancer if you are worried about money.

### Medical expenses

Medical expenses that you might have to pay include:

- Visits to your family doctor (GP)
- Visits to hospital
- Overnight stays in hospital
- Medicines
- Medical aids and equipment (appliances), like wigs

How much you pay towards your medical expenses depends on whether you qualify for a medical card and what type of health insurance you have, if any.

**If you have a medical card**, you will probably have very little to pay for hospital and GP (family doctor) care or your medication. If you are over 70, you can get a free GP visit card.

Medical cards are usually for people on low incomes, but sometimes a card can be given even if your income is above the limit. For example, if you have a large amount of medical expenses. This is known as a discretionary medical card.

An emergency medical card may be issued if you are terminally ill and in palliative care, irrespective of your income.

**If you don't have a medical card** you will have to pay some of the cost of your care and medication.

**If you have health insurance** the insurance company will pay some of the costs, but the amount will depend on your insurance plan. It's important to contact your insurance company before starting treatment to check you're covered.

## Benefits and allowances

There are benefits that can help people who are ill and their family. For example, Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Carer's Leave.

If you want more information on benefits and allowances, contact:

- The medical social worker in the hospital you are attending
- Citizens Information – Tel: 0761 074 000
- Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection – Tel: 1890 662 244 or ask to speak to a DSP representative at your local health centre or DSP office.

Always have your PPS number to hand when you are asking about entitlements and benefits. It's also a good idea to keep a copy of completed forms, so take a photo or photocopy them before posting.

## If you have money problems

If you are getting into debt or you are in debt, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) can help you. MABS can look at your situation, work out your budget, help you to deal with your debts and manage your payments. The service is free and confidential. Call the MABS Helpline 0761 07 2000 for information.

If you are finding it hard to cope financially, contact your medical social worker in the hospital or your local health centre for advice. The Irish Cancer Society can also give some help towards travel costs in certain cases. See page 61 for more details of our Volunteer Driver Service and the Travel2Care fund.

You can also call our Cancer Nurseline 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre and the nurse will suggest ways to help you manage.

## More information

Go to [www.cancer.ie/publications](http://www.cancer.ie/publications) and check out our booklet, *Managing the Financial Impact of Cancer*. This explains:

- **Medical costs** and help available
- **Benefits and allowances** that you or your family may qualify for
- **Travel services**
- **Ways to cope with the cost of cancer**



The booklet also has lots of other information to help you manage the cost of cancer. For example, disability and mobility supports, help for people in financial difficulty, help for carers and living at home and nursing home supports.



## Irish Cancer Society services

Our Cancer Support Department provides a range of cancer support services for people with cancer, at home and in hospital, including:

- Cancer Nurseline
- Daffodil Centres
- Survivor Support
- Support in your area
- Patient travel and financial support services
- Night nursing
- Publications and website information

### Cancer Nurseline Freephone 1800 200 700

Call our Cancer Nurseline and speak to one of our cancer nurses for confidential advice, support and information. The Cancer Nurseline is open Monday-Friday, 9am to 5pm. You can also email us on [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie) or visit our Online Community at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

For the deaf community, our Cancer Nurseline is using the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) using IRIS. Contact IRIS by text 087 980 6996 or email: [remote@slis.ie](mailto:remote@slis.ie)



## Daffodil Centres

Visit our Daffodil Centres, located in 13 hospitals nationwide. The centres are staffed by cancer nurses and trained volunteers who provide confidential advice, support and information to anyone concerned about or affected by cancer.

### Who can use the Daffodil Centres?

Daffodil Centres are open to everyone – you don't need an appointment. Just call in if you want to talk or need information on any aspect of cancer including:

- Cancer treatments and side-effects
- Chemotherapy group education sessions
- Emotional support
- Practical entitlements and services
- Living with and beyond cancer
- End-of-life services
- Lifestyle and cancer prevention
- Local cancer support groups and centres

You can email [daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie](mailto:daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie) or visit [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) to find your local Daffodil Centre.



## Survivor Support



Speak to someone who has been through a cancer diagnosis. Our trained volunteers provide emotional and practical support to anyone going through or finished with their treatment.

### Support in your area

We work with cancer support groups and centres across the country to ensure cancer patients have access to confidential support including counselling. See page 64 for more information.

Email: [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)

## Patient travel and financial support services



We provide practical and financial support for patients in need, travelling to and from their cancer appointments. There are two services available through the Society:

- **Travel2Care** is a limited fund, made available by the National Cancer Control Programme, for patients who are travelling for cancer tests or treatment to one of the national designated cancer centres or their approved satellite centres. Patients must be travelling over 50km one way to access the fund.
- **Irish Cancer Society Volunteer Driver Service** is for patients undergoing chemotherapy treatments who are having difficulty getting to and from their local appointments in our partner hospitals.

To access either of these services please contact your hospital healthcare professional.



## Irish Cancer Society Night Nursing



We provide end-of-life care for cancer patients in their own home. We offer up to 10 nights of care for each patient. Our service allows patients to remain at home for the last days of their lives surrounded by their families and loved ones. This is the only service of its kind in the Republic, providing palliative nursing care at night to cancer patients. The health professional who is looking after your loved one can request a night nurse for you, so talk to your palliative care team member, GP or public health nurse about this.

## Publications and website information

We provide information on a range of topics including cancer types, treatments and side-effects, coping with cancer, children and cancer, and financial concerns. Visit our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) or call our Cancer Nurseline for free copies of our publications.



If you would like more information on any of our services, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

## Local cancer support services

The Irish Cancer Society works with cancer support services all over Ireland. They have a range of services for cancer patients and their families, during and after treatment, many of which are free. For example:

- **Professional counselling** (the Irish Cancer Society funds up to 8 sessions of free one-to-one counselling in many affiliated support services)
- **Support groups**, often led by professionals like social workers, counsellors, psychologists, or cancer nurses



- **Special exercise programmes**, like the Irish Cancer Society's Strides for Life walking group programme
- **Stress management and relaxation techniques**, such as mindfulness and meditation

- **Complementary therapies** like massage, reflexology and acupuncture
- **Specialist services** such as prosthesis or wig fitting and manual lymph drainage
- **Mind and body sessions**, for example, yoga and tai chi



- **Expressive therapies** such as creative writing and art
- **Free Irish Cancer Society publications** and other high-quality, trustworthy information on a range of topics

Cancer support services usually have a drop-in service where you can call in for a cup of tea and find out what's available.

You can call our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700 to find your nearest cancer support centre. Or see our online directory at <http://www.cancer.ie/support/support-in-your-area/directory>

## Questions to ask your doctor

Here is a list of questions people often want to ask. There is also some space for you to write down your own questions if you wish. Do ask questions – it is always better to ask than to worry.

Will the cancer treatment I am getting cause fatigue?

---

Are there ways to control my fatigue or make it better?

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How long will the fatigue last?

---

What can I do myself to help with my fatigue?

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Is there anyone I can be referred to help me with my fatigue?

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How can I best support my relative or friend who has fatigue?

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## Your own questions

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## FATIGUE DIARY

### TIPS ON USING THIS DIARY

You may notice that you feel more fatigued on certain days of your treatment than others – or even at certain times of the day. Plan your activities for the times when you tend to have more energy.

### DESCRIBE YOUR FATIGUE THIS WAY



1 = Can do **most** normal activities



2 = Can do **less than** normal activities



3 = Can do **some** normal activities



4 = Can **hardly** do any activities



5 = Can **not** do any activities






On the diary pages, add the date and fill in the table, rating your fatigue level 1-5 at different times of the day. You can also add some notes about how fatigue affected you each day.

There is also space to record any treatment you received and your blood counts.

It's helpful to show the diary to your doctor, so they can monitor your fatigue.

For more fatigue diary pages, call the Cancer Nurseline 1800 200 700 or download from our website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

## FATIGUE DIARY

-  1 = Can do **most** normal activities
-  2 = Can do **less than** normal activities
-  3 = Can do **some** normal activities
-  4 = Can **hardly** do any activities
-  5 = Can **not** do any activities

### WEEK COMMENCING

HOW DID YOU FEEL TODAY? GIVE A NUMBER 1-5 IN THE BOXES BELOW

	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING	HOW DID FATIGUE AFFECT YOU TODAY?
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				






### TREATMENT RECEIVED THIS WEEK

---

### BLOOD COUNTS

HAEMOGLOBIN g/dl	WHITE BLOOD CELLS	PLATELETS	BLOOD TRANSFUSION

## FATIGUE DIARY

-  1 = Can do **most** normal activities
-  2 = Can do **less than** normal activities
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Sunday				

### TREATMENT RECEIVED THIS WEEK

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HAEMOGLOBIN g/dl	WHITE BLOOD CELLS	PLATELETS	BLOOD TRANSFUSION

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Friday				
Saturday				
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### TREATMENT RECEIVED THIS WEEK

### BLOOD COUNTS

HAEMOGLOBIN g/dl	WHITE BLOOD CELLS	PLATELETS	BLOOD TRANSFUSION

## Acknowledgments

This booklet has been produced by the Irish Cancer Society to meet the need for improved communication, information and support for cancer patients and their families throughout diagnosis and treatment. We would like to thank all those patients, families and professionals whose support and advice made this publication possible. We would particularly like to acknowledge the contribution of the many consultants, nurses and other healthcare professionals who so kindly gave up their time and expertise to contribute to previous editions of this booklet.

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## Join the Irish Cancer Society team

If you want to make a difference to people affected by cancer, join our team!

### Support people affected by cancer

Reaching out directly to people with cancer is one of the most rewarding ways to help:

- Help people needing lifts to hospital by becoming a volunteer driver
- Give one-on-one support to someone newly diagnosed with cancer as part of our Survivor Support programme
- Give information and support to people concerned about or affected by cancer at one of our hospital-based Daffodil Centres

### Share your experiences

Use your voice to bring reassurance to cancer patients and their families, help people to connect with our services or inspire them to get involved as a volunteer:

- Share your cancer story
- Tell people about our services
- Describe what it's like to organise or take part in a fundraising event

### Raise money

All our services are funded by the public's generosity:

- Donate direct
- Take part in one of our fundraising events or challenges
- Organise your own event

Contact our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700 if you want to get involved!

### Did you like this booklet?

We would love to hear your comments or suggestions.

Please email [reviewers@irishcancer.ie](mailto:reviewers@irishcancer.ie)



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