

## Liver Cancer & Tips to Beat Fatigue

*The fatigue caused by liver cancer can be grueling. But watching your diet, staying active, and finding family and spiritual support can boost your energy.*

By Beth W. Orenstein

Medically reviewed by Lindsey Marcellin, MD, MPH

Fatigue is a common, debilitating **symptom of liver cancer**. In some cases, it's the fatigue that sends the patient to the doctor in the first place. Other times, liver cancer patients do not experience extreme fatigue until weeks after their cancer is diagnosed. Fatigue is a normal part of **liver cancer**, but you don't have to resign yourself to being tired all the time. There are steps you can take to improve your energy.

Patients can feel a lack of energy at any time of the day, but commonly they are fatigued not long after waking, says Otis Brawley, MD, chief medical officer for the American Cancer Society.

### Liver Cancer: Fatigue Causes

Some of the causes of fatigue in liver cancer patients are:

- **Anemia.** Tumors can spread to the bone marrow, causing anemia (a low red blood cell count). Tumors also can release toxic substances that interfere with the normal function of the body's cells.
- **Cancer medications and treatments.** Fatigue is a common side effect of the common **treatments for cancer** (chemotherapy, radiation, surgery) including liver cancer.
- **Stress.** The diagnosis of liver cancer can cause emotional stress, which in turn can cause chemical changes in the body that are unhealthy and result in fatigue.

### Liver Cancer: Relieving Fatigue

"There really is no good treatment for the fatigue that people have with liver cancer," says Dr. Brawley. However, there are some things you can do to help boost your energy levels.

- **Watch what you eat.** First, "avoid any foods and drugs that build up in the body that the liver can't clear," Brawley says. Also, you should choose foods that provide the best nutritional benefit possible while receiving liver cancer treatments, says Russell Mark Reisner, MD, an oncologic surgeon at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Philadelphia. A registered dietitian can help you devise a **meal plan** that meets your needs.
- **Take supplements.** Vitamin and mineral supplements can provide a boost if your liver cancer has depleted your body of vital nutrients. Among those you may need: beta carotene, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), selenium, and vitamins C and E. Check with your doctor about your specific needs, before taking any dietary supplements.

- **Keep active.** “We know that inactivity by a person who does or doesn’t have cancer can lead to malaise and fatigue,” says Dr. Reisner. “At [our hospital], we have a program, Motion for Life, in which patients can learn exercises to improve their muscle tone and strength, and that decreases fatigue to a point.” The exercises are very appropriate to the patient’s abilities, he says. “Obviously, we don’t want our patients training for a marathon,” Reisner adds.
- **Keep your spirits up.** A cancer patient’s mental state can contribute to his or her overall feeling of malaise and fatigue, Reisner says. That’s why “we have mind-body specialists to evaluate our patients and institute treatments — sometimes pharmacological and sometimes discussions that can help alleviate their fears and anxieties,” he says. Having a cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, and finding support from family members and professionals can help eliminate concerns that exacerbate fatigue. Some patients also might benefit from speaking to a spiritual leader, such as a minister, priest, or rabbi.
- **Relax and meditate.** Relaxation can have an effect on the inflammation that is causing your fatigue, says Heather Zwickey, PhD, director of the Helgott Research Institute in Portland, Ore. So learn relaxation techniques such as meditation. “You don’t have to go out and join an ashram,” she says. “There are tapes and CDs, some specifically designed for cancer patients, which will walk you through the steps in the comfort of your own home.” As little as 20 minutes a day in meditation can go a long way in helping reduce your fatigue, Zwickey says.

Remember, Zwickey says, your fatigue is normal. Your body wants to use all its energy to fight your liver cancer, she says. Combat the overwhelming feeling of fatigue with a positive attitude, healthy diet, and relaxation.