

FATIGUE IN CANCER

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Cancer related fatigue is the most prominent symptom experienced by patients with cancer. Fatigue has been defined as easy tiring and decreased capacity to maintain performance. Many factors, however, including surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, biotherapy, immunodepression, infections, anorexia and loss of weight, or feeling of sadness, may cause or at least aggravate the feeling of tiredness in cancer patients. It may be present early in the course of the illness, may be exacerbated by treatments, and is present in almost all patients with advanced cancer. The pattern of cancer related fatigue varies according to type of cancer, cancer treatment. A specific mechanism of cancer related fatigue is not well understood. Substances produced by the tumor are postulated to induced fatigue. The pathophysiology in any individual may be multifactorial. Proposed mechanisms include abnormalities in energy metabolism related to increased requirements (e.g., due to tumor growth, infection, fever, or surgery); decreased availability of metabolic substrate (e.g., due to anemia, hypoxemia, or poor nutrition); or the abnormal production of substances that impair metabolism or activity of muscles (e.g., cytokines or antibodies). In addition to the assessment of the intensity of fatigue, the clinical assessment of these patients requires clinicians to determine the impact of all factors on the presence of fatigue in a given patient.

In order to optimally treat fatigue, it is vital to identify and prioritize the different underlying factors in each individual patient. A thorough history, including recent treatment history, physical examination, and medication, in addition to simple laboratory investigations will help identify possible underlying causes. The pharmacologic therapies for fatigue associated with medical illness have not been rigorously evaluated in controlled trials.

Fatigue is a symptom and as such is inherently subjective. Despite the high prevalence and distress associated with fatigue, there has been little recognition of this symptom as an important issue for research and clinical guideline development. At the present time relatively little is known about its epidemiology, etiologies, and management.