



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)
info@cancercaare.org
www.cancercaare.org

fact sheet

COPING WITH CANCER-RELATED WEIGHT CHANGES AND MUSCLE LOSS

Most people with cancer experience weight changes, muscle loss and fatigue (extreme tiredness) at some point during their treatment. Managing these symptoms can help you feel better and allow you to continue with more of your usual activities. This may also help you keep your strength up, which can help you finish your full course of treatment.

WHY DO WEIGHT CHANGES AND MUSCLE LOSS HAPPEN?

One cause is the cancer itself. For example, in an effort to fight the cancer, the body produces substances called cytokines. These substances can lead to weight loss, muscle loss, and a decrease in appetite. Another common cause is the treatments for cancer. Radiation and chemotherapy often cause a decrease in appetite. They can also lead to side effects such as nausea, vomiting, and mouth sores, which can affect your ability to eat normally, further contributing to weight and muscle loss. Fatigue is also a factor, since the decreases in exercise and other physical activities that happen when you're not feeling well can contribute to muscle loss. For more information on treatment side effects like fatigue and mouth sores, read CancerCare's booklet titled "Understanding and Managing Chemotherapy Side Effects."



HOW ARE WEIGHT CHANGES AND MUSCLE LOSS TREATED?

As with any side effect experienced during treatment, it's important to talk to your health care team to decide what's best for you. To help manage these symptoms, your health care team may prescribe medicines like anti-nausea medications and steroid medications. These drugs can increase appetite for some people and may help to prevent weight and muscle loss, but they do not build up lost muscle tissue.

Keep in mind that appetite and energy levels may be affected by other treatable conditions, such as pain, anxiety or depression. Talk with your doctor if you are experiencing any of these concerns.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MAINTAIN MY WEIGHT AND BUILD STRENGTH?

Along with taking any medicines your doctor prescribes, there are many things you can do to help your body stay strong. Good, balanced nutrition and proper hydration are very important:

Eat a balanced diet, and be sure to include protein to protect lean body mass. Beef, pork, poultry, tofu and soy nuts are excellent sources of protein. So are dairy products – try some Greek yogurt, which is higher in protein than regular yogurt. For more information on nutrition during

(over)

treatment, read CancerCare's fact sheet titled "The Importance of Nutrition During Treatment."

Increase the number of calories you eat. Choose nutritious foods that you enjoy. If appetite is a problem, try eating smaller, more frequent meals; make milkshakes, smoothies, and purees, which may be easier to digest; and add milk or protein powder to your foods.

Drink plenty of liquids throughout the day. Water is best, but you can also get fluids from soups, popsicles and sports drinks.

Keep a journal. Keeping details of the side effects that you experience will help your health care team. Having a health care journal or notebook will allow you to keep all of your health information in one place. If you are experiencing constipation, it may be helpful to keep a journal detailing:

- Physical activities you do and how they affect your mood and energy level
- Your diet
- Fluid intake and type of fluid
- Medications you're currently taking

Physical exercise also plays a key role in building new muscle and decreasing fatigue. It has also been shown to improve one's mood, outlook, and self-image.

Start off slowly. If you are very weak or tired, start with 3 or 4 minutes of walking at a time and build up from there. You can also try some upper body exercises while sitting in a chair – moving your arms up and down and front to back can help maintain flexibility. Making a fist and lifting your arms up and down in front of you can increase strength.

Pay attention to your breathing. Rounded shoulders restrict chest movement, but good posture helps your breathing and reduces fatigue. Focus on maximizing your breath during activities: for example, when climbing stairs, breathe out with each step so you won't be as tired when you reach the top.

Before starting any physical activity, it's important to talk with your health care team.



GET HELP: YOUR DOCTOR IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

Professional oncology social workers at CancerCare understand the complex issues that arise with a cancer diagnosis. Social workers can help you manage any emotional or practical concerns that may be causing symptoms and help you develop ways to cope. CancerCare's professional oncology social workers help anyone affected by cancer, free of charge. To speak with a professional oncology social worker, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).

CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

Facebook: [facebook.com/cancercare](https://www.facebook.com/cancercare)

Twitter: @cancercare



CANCERCARE®

National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

© 2016 CancerCare®