

Andrew Von Eschenbach, MD

Former NCI Director

"About 4 out of 5 people with cancer encounter fatigue during the course of their illness and more than half say they feel extremely tired almost daily. In fact, fatigue is a more common side effect to treatment than nausea, depression, or pain. The program -- Cancer Related Fatigue, offers insight and hope into this condition."

Narrator

Cancer and its treatment are no longer as deadly or debilitating as they were a generation ago. And as a result, many millions more are cancer survivors today. But cancer treatment still is not easy and for many patients an unexpected side effect is the *one* that gives the most trouble: cancer related fatigue.

Frances Foote

Patient

"I could hardly get out of bed in the morning – I mean I was that tired and just going down the stairs. It tired me out. I would get out bed, come down the stairs, sit on the davenport and that's all I could do for awhile."

Narrator

Diagnosed with uterine cancer three years ago, 70-year old Frances Foote underwent surgery and chemotherapy...treatments designed to save her life. But she wasn't prepared for the overwhelming fatigue that accompanied the cancer and its treatment. It profoundly affected her quality of life.

Frances Foote

Patient

"You get to that point where you get up in the morning and I don't know, sit for the rest of the day. You are too tired to read because you can't concentrate. You just kind of lose your brain. If I had thought that it was not going to get better, I would have stopped everything."

Narrator

Cancer related fatigue prevents patients from doing what most of us consider "normal": getting out of bed, making coffee, getting dressed; Not only are patients fighting to stay alive, they're fighting to stay involved in their own lives.

Frances Foote

Patient

If you're tired all the time, what can you possibly do? Mentally you can sit there and vegetate because you wouldn't have the ambition to do anything, except watch television and then you fall asleep.

Narrator

Frances is not alone. According to the American Cancer Society, fatigue is the most common side effect of cancer and its treatment. In fact, 90% of patients receiving treatment for cancer have fatigue. And one out of three cancer survivors continues to have some level of fatigue after completing treatment.

Narrator

Doctor Michael Irwin is a professor of psychiatry and senior research scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles. He's done extensive research on cancer related fatigue.

Michael R. Irwin, MD

UCLA

"Cancers in and of themselves can cause fatigue. The cancer fatigue that was found in the cancer survivors was so disabling and so severe that it significantly impaired their ability to carry out day-to-day activities."

Narrator

In 1997, Dr. John Glaspy, an oncologist at UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, authored a groundbreaking research study that helped many clinicians begin to understand the impact of cancer related fatigue.

John Glaspy, MD

UCLA

"Our patients decided that they wanted to do a study to prove to us that fatigue was the major cause of problems for cancer patients and it turned out that the majority of American cancer patients were debilitated by tiredness and they ranked that far above pain and about 12 % of them said that they would rather be dead than feel as tired as they were."

Narrator

But there is hope. Drug therapies may help patients regain their energy and quality of life. Up next, many cancer patients experience fatigue but they may experience it in different ways. We'll take a look at different causes of cancer related fatigue.

Narrator

Meet Andy Eichoff, he looks and feels fine today, but Andy wasn't always this healthy. Diagnosed with a rare form of melanoma, Andy underwent four extended periods of aggressive chemotherapy that left him feeling drained and hopeless.

Andy Eichoff Jr.

Patient

"It is a little disconcerting and a little uncomfortable to look back and remember how weak I was, how exhausted I was and how I felt."

Narrator

What Andy didn't know was that the lifesaving chemotherapy treatment was making him anemic and that anemia was causing the fatigue.

Narrator

Doctor Lee Schwartzberg, has treated thousands of patients at the West Clinic in Memphis, Tennessee. He says that fatigue is a common complaint for patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Lee Schwartzberg, MD

West Clinic, Memphis, Tennessee

"Over half the patients who get chemotherapy for their disease develop some degree of anemia. So this is a very prevalent situation that occurs in tens of thousands of patients at any given time."

John Glaspy, MD

UCLA

"Anemia means that you have fewer red blood cells in your bloodstream than you're supposed to have. These cells carry oxygen if you have too little you can't carry enough oxygen so you tend to work out to about 40% of the volume of your blood. Anyone who has less than that amount of red cells in their blood is anemic. "

Natural Sound:

Waterfall

Narrator

Memphis resident Kathy Birdsong was anemic but didn't know it. She was recently diagnosed with breast cancer and immediately underwent treatment. Shortly after the chemotherapy began she noticed something was wrong.

Kathy Birdsong

Patient

"I began to feel less energized than I normally am. About a week into or a week post the chemotherapy was when I could really tell the difference. When you're tired, it affects your daily living."

Lee Schwartzberg, MD
West Clinic, Memphis, Tennessee

"When you don't feel well, it tends to send a signal that maybe I'm not doing well...A lot of my patients who get anemic and get tired and feel bad think that their cancer might be getting worse. That's not necessarily the case at all. That can be a complication of the treatment. So the chemotherapy might be working – the cancer may be shrinking, but they paradoxically may be feeling worse temporarily because they are more anemic."

Narrator

Blood transfusions can help cancer patients with severe anemia. Milder forms can be treated with medications that increase the body's production of red blood cells. These medications replace the red blood cell boosting hormone naturally found in the blood stream.

John Glaspy, MD,
UCLA

"Those drugs do what our own body's hormone erythropoietin does. They interact with a receptor on our bone marrow and tell our bone marrow to make more red cells. "

Lee Schwartzberg, MD
West Clinic, Memphis, Tennessee

"The greatest advantages of using the Erythropoietic agents to treat anemia related to cancer and chemotherapy is the fact that we can prevent transfusions in patients and improve safety. We can improve their quality of life because we can intervene at a point before they are more symptomatic from the treatments, in other words, before they're tired, before they get fatigued from the anemia."

Narrator

Frances and Andy were able to treat the anemia with medication alone, they didn't need blood transfusions.

Andy Eichoff
Patient

"The medicine had a good impact. If it had not been for that, I am not sure how long it would have taken or how I would have felt – I can't imagine without those medicines because it really has an impact and without that, it would have taken much longer and been much more of an arduous experience to try to come back to normal."

Frances Foote
Patient

"Considering my age, I am pretty much back to where I can do what I want as far as the tiredness and fatigue are concerned. I mean I don't feel like I have to crawl out of bed and get halfway down the stairs and stop. I can do all that, and I can get in the car and go away and come back. Do what I want."

Narrator

The exact mechanism that causes fatigue in patients with cancer is not known, yet it is likely that many different factors play a role. Anemia from chemotherapy, and the cancer itself are major causes of fatigue. Others include:

- Malnutrition: Cancer treatment can affect the patient's ability to eat properly.
- Patients may feel nauseated which may interfere with proper nutrition.
- Pain: chronic pain can cause patients to lose their appetite, lose sleep, and reduce their activities.
- Medications: Several medications can produce symptoms of fatigue and problems concentrating,
- These medications include: pain-relieving drugs, sleep medicines, and anti-depressants.
- Emotional Distress & Depression: A diagnosis of cancer is always bad news...the experience can leave many patients anxious and depressed. And unable to think clearly and rationally.

Sleep disorders and inactivity: Disrupted sleep, poor sleep, decreased nighttime sleep or too much daytime sleep and inactivity may be contributing factors in cancer related fatigue. Radiation therapy can cause pretty severe fatigue, even in the absence of anemia.

When we come back, we'll meet a woman whose cancer diagnosis and treatment brought her down into depression. We'll see how she manages that condition today and how the cancer experience changed her life.

Narrator

Cancer related fatigue can sometimes be treated with lifestyle modifications. Patients find that taking short naps, eating smaller meals throughout the day, and getting some physical activity can help them feel better.

Experts believe making small changes can be the difference between having little to no energy and having enough energy to get through the day in as normal a fashion as possible.

John Glaspy, MD

UCLA

"Cancer patients need to be absolutely sure that they are getting enough sleep and not losing weight and doing the best they can to rest a little bit during the day so that they can squeeze as much juice out of life as they can."

Narrator

Kathy Birdsong maintained her usual busy routine during her treatment. But she found that stopping and taking a break became an integral part of her recovery.

Kathy Birdsong

Patient

"I rested a lot. I continued to work fulltime, but I reserved the right to come home and take a nap, which I did occasionally. This is what I feel like doing, and this is what I don't feel like doing and let go of those things that really don't matter."

Narrator

Kathy's also had a supportive group of friends who helped get her through her cancer experience.

Kathy Birdsong

Patient

"I had someone that was my driver for every single treatment. One of my best friends actually became the coordinator – and she's quite bossy. So she would tell everybody what they needed to get done. And having somebody there with you as you are going through the chemo makes it a lot easier. Because it gives you somebody to talk to, somebody to joke with; it makes the weight a lot easier to bear."

Narrator

Sometimes, however, for some patients, the weight can be almost too much to bear.

Industrial engineer Yanira Muniz was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly after her 33rd birthday. Her mother had breast cancer many years earlier, but Yanira thought she was too young to be concerned. When the diagnosis was confirmed she broke down emotionally.

Yanira Muniz

Patient

"I just couldn't deal with cancer, so I didn't say anything to anybody for about a week and a half. I had my moments. I had my moments where I would just sit and cry and I'd scream and cry and cry and cry. I just wanted to cry."

Narrator

Doctors determined that a bilateral mastectomy, the surgical removal of both breasts, with reconstruction, was the best way to treat Yanira and lower the risk of the cancer coming back. After the operation, Yanira had some difficulty coping.

Yanira Muniz

Patient

"I would see myself in the mirror before the reconstruction – it was very painful. It was very painful because I feel deformed I feel like it was horrible to see. I was just out of control emotionally."

Narrator

Sleepless nights followed and Yanira's emotional distress grew. The experience left her feeling terribly fatigued.

Michael R. Irwin, MD

UCLA

"There's a very high co morbidity or relationship between fatigue, particular persistent fatigue and depressive symptoms as well as difficulties with sleep."

Narrator

Yanira sought treatment for her depression and has been able to return to her normal day-to-day activities.

Yanira Muniz

Patient

"I've learned to understand what's going on with me. I do take my anti-depressants everyday, everyday. I still have depression; it doesn't mean that I don't get depressed at all. But I understand that I am able to deal with it more clearly because my mind is clear."

Narrator

The key to remember is that many factors that cause fatigue are treatable. Recognizing the problem and treating it before it gets worse can help patients overcome it.

Lee Schwartzberg, MD

West Clinic, Memphis, Tennessee

"If you ask patients what their most troubling side effect is from cancer and chemotherapy, they answer that fatigue is their No.1 side effect. The one that troubles them the most and actually the one that occurs the most, too - even more than pain, nausea, vomiting and other symptoms that are common to cancer and its treatment.

Treating patients earlier before their symptoms get worse, which is a function of worsening anemia, makes sense."

Narrator

Cancer and its side effects changed Yanira priorities - she focuses more on her family and her spiritual side. And it's changed her perspective on life.

Yanira Muniz

Patient

"I lost something physically - I lost part of my body, but I gained a thousand things more. This experience showed me how loved I am."

Narrator

The road back from fatigue can be a long one, but there are several paths patients can take to find help. We'll explore some of them when we come back, also we'll see which patients researchers believe are most likely to suffer from cancer related fatigue.

Narrator

Fatigue can be caused by more than one underlying problem. It's important for patients to talk with a medical professional to determine the right course of action.

Lee Schwartzberg, MD

West Clinic, Memphis, Tennessee

"Treating fatigue helps improve patient outlook, and that in turn has some relationship to the way they do and to the way they approach their therapy and their disease."

Narrator

And treating the fatigue associated with chemotherapy in particular, can help patients feel less stress about the treatment itself.

Lee Schwartzberg, MD

West Clinic, Memphis, Tennessee

"One of the toughest parts for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy is the misconception about what the chemotherapy experience will be. And that's in part related to popular culture and what you see on TV and what you see in the movies about these horrible experiences. That's really not true anymore...We've got the chemotherapy experience refined to a point to try to make it as tolerable as possible. And we no longer have the situation where cancer patients go home and get sick for days or weeks at a time. We've got wonderful medicines that treat nausea and vomiting now and chemotherapy is not a horror show the way it was years ago."

Narrator

Doctor Michael Irwin and his team of researchers at UCLA may be on the path to creating different treatments for fatigue. Dr. Irwin supervised a research study of women who had been treated for breast cancer whose fatigue lasted long after their treatment was completed.

Michael R. Irwin, MD

UCLA

"What we have found is that there is a higher incidence of inflammation in the women who have persistent fatigue. The inflammation is driven by chemical messengers or protein messengers that can signal the brain and we think induce or cause the fatigue."

Narrator

By understanding how inflammation triggers fatigue, researchers may be able to develop new therapies that can target the inflammation and potentially reduce fatigue.

Michael R. Irwin, MD

UCLA

“Providing information about what is the biological cause for this disabling behavioral condition of fatigue is the necessary first step for the development of treatments.”

Narrator

While researchers work to perfect new therapies, patients and their loved ones need to educate themselves about cancer related fatigue and what they can do to help themselves.

The National Cancer Institute offers some measures to help patients save and regain productivity. These include:

- List activities from more important to least important
- Establish a daily routine
- Reduce stress through meditation, taking deep breaths, reading, listening to music and even talking to others
- Keep a journal or diary of how you feel each day. This can help plan daily activities
- Save energy while doing household chores. For example, sit on a stool while cooking or washing dishes.
- Let others help. They might cook a meal, pick up something at the store, or do the laundry.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Friends and family might be willing to help, but may not know what to do.
- Try to balance activities with rest. Take short naps throughout the day and
- Eat a balanced diet unless instructed otherwise by a physician
- Avoid too much caffeine and
- Always consult with a physician

Narrator

If the fatigue becomes worse, doctors may prescribe medications such as stimulants, anti-depressants, or blood cell growth factors for anemia. Keep in mind these medications usually take several weeks before patients can feel the effects. Patients don't have to give up their life for this very common and often treatable side effect.

Getting the proper treatment helped Andy Eichoff battle his condition, but it was the love of his wife and the gift of his grandson that got him back on his feet again.

Andy Eichoff Jr.

Patient

"I was uplifted, supported and strengthened by family. My wife is a cancer survivor from 10 years ago, so she gave me a lot of love and support and also at times a good bit of humility. My 6-year-old grandson was a very special source of strength because he energized me. I would sometimes pinch myself and want to run that extra lap so to speak just to be with him."

Narrator

There is hope and Andy, Frances, Kathy, and Yanira are proof that fatigue doesn't have to win. By having a strong support group and a positive mental outlook, anything is possible.

Frances Foote

Patient

"I have a very deep faith and I think that helps. But the positive attitude is an absolute must. I don't think you can go into this with any misgivings."

Kathy Birdsong

Patient

"I think your mental outlook absolutely can dictate how successful you are going to be through your treatment."

Andy Eichoff Jr.

Patient

"You are having something done to you that is very devastating, very overwhelming and all encompassing to save your life. Remember who you are, and that you're not different and you're the same person – you're just tired."

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For more information on cancer related fatigue please contact
The National Cancer Institute@

www.cancer.gov

or
1-800-4CANCER

THE PATIENT CHANNEL PRESENTS - CANCER RELATED FATIGUE

Or visit the American Cancer Society website @

www.cancer.org

1-800-ACS-2345

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