

**TE NGOIKORE  
ME TE PŌAUAU**

**MANAGING FATIGUE  
AND BRAIN FOG  
AFTER CANCER**



# Managing Fatigue

*'Because I've finished cancer treatment, people expect that I should just be able to get on with work and activities. They don't understand how hard this is for me and how tired I am all the time.'*

Young person

It can take a while for your tinana (body) to rebuild strength and stamina and find its new rhythm after treatment. Cancer fatigue is common and can feel like **'an overwhelming sense of tiredness along with lack of energy which doesn't improve after rest or sleep'**. You may experience some of the following:

- Difficulty doing simple things, such as brushing your hair or getting dressed
- Feeling you have no energy or strength
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- Difficulty thinking, speaking or making decisions
- Feeling breathless after light activity
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)
- Losing interest in intimacy
- Feeling low in mood and more emotional than usual.

With time, things usually start to improve. However, as everyone is different, some young people will notice improvements in a few months, while others may find the fatigue continues for longer, possibly even a few years. The exact cause of cancer fatigue is unknown, but it's thought to be caused by a combination of the cancer itself and cancer treatment.

## How can I manage fatigue?

Fatigue can affect your work, education and relationships, but there are things you can do to help manage it:

**Get moving.** The next time you feel a wave of tiredness coming, take a short hikoi (walk) outside. Fresh air and gentle movement will help stimulate blood flow and help you feel more alert.



Regular exercise can boost your appetite, give you more energy and improve your sleep.

**Eat well and drink plenty of wai (water).** Reducing your sugar intake and eating a well-balanced diet high in nutrient-rich foods, will help you regain strength and give you more energy. Drinking plenty of water also reducing headaches and tiredness.



For more tips on healthy eating check our Kai after Cancer booklet.

**Rest.** Don't push yourself too hard. Rest when you begin to feel tired and schedule regular rest periods each day, especially after long periods of work.



Rest can be lying down or sitting quietly - not just sleeping.

**Try complementary therapies.** Some people find a massage, yoga or aromatherapy to have great benefits. Not only can they help unwind the central nervous system, but they can be enjoyable too.

**Get help with daily chores.** Keeping up with daily chores when you have fatigue is tough. You don't have to do it all by yourself.



Let others know you need help and accept any support offered. Having someone else do the cleaning or cooking can make all the difference.

## TRY A FATIGUE DIARY

Find balance. As fatigue affects everyone differently, it can be hard to keep track of the impact it has on your daily life. A good way to do this is to keep a fatigue diary.

You can use a fatigue diary to:

- See what times of day you have the most energy
- Note down things that might be affecting your fatigue
- Plan important activities for when you have the most energy
- Look at the last week and decide if you planned too much or not enough activity
- Work out what makes your fatigue better or worse.

### Give Yourself an Energy Rating

In your diary note down things that might be affecting your fatigue. If you don't have a diary, you can do this in your calendar on phone. When you feel your energy levels change, just add an entry to the time of the day and give yourself an energy rating.

Use a scale from 1 to 5:

- 1 No fatigue** - able to do all normal activities.
- 2 Mild fatigue** - able to do most normal activities.
- 3 Moderate fatigue** - able to do some activities but need rest.
- 4 Severe fatigue** - difficulty walking or doing activities such as cooking or shopping.
- 5 Extreme fatigue** - feeling like you need to sleep or rest all day.

After keeping track of your activities for a week, look back and adapt your timetable for the next week. You can use something like the example here or download and print free copies of a fatigue diary from the following website. [www.macmillan.org.uk/fatigue](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/fatigue) Macmillan is a UK charity that has resources to support cancer recovery.



Try to do only one thing at a time. Avoid overloading yourself and try to plan your week to ensure an even balance of education or work, physical exercise, home and social activities.

Example of a fatigue diary:

Fatigue Diary	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Morning							
Afternoon							
Evening							
Sleep hours							

### Things that helped improve my fatigue:

Keep track of any things that you have done which have helped you improve your fatigue. For example: having a rest in the middle of the day or going to bed earlier, taking a hikoi (walk) in the morning, or saying no to activities when tired.

# Sleep

Sleep is what gives your body and mind the opportunity to rest and recover and lack of sleep can have a huge impact on your wellbeing. Most adults need between seven to nine hours of sleep a night.



## WHEN SHOULD I TALK TO A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL?

If pain is keeping you awake, or if your fatigue is interfering with your ability to go about your daily life, tell your healthcare team.

Some medications can cause side-effects such as sleeplessness or nausea, or make you need the toilet more, which can interrupt your sleep patterns. Your healthcare team may be able to help you with different medications or interventions to help you sleep better and reduce fatigue.

**Tip**

It is important you talk to your doctor before taking medication or herbal/alternative treatments for sleep trouble.

## TOP TIPS FOR IMPROVING SLEEP

**Sleep when you are sleepy.** If you have not fallen asleep after 20 minutes, get up and do something boring or calming with dim lights until you're sleepy.

**Try only to sleep in bed.** This will help your brain and body to associate your bed as a place for sleep.

**Turn off the screen.** Bright lights tell your brain that it is time to be awake whilst dark/dim lights tell your brain it's time to sleep. Make sure you are not using screens in bed, especially games and social media which keep your brain active.

**Stay away from caffeine.** Avoid coffee, tea, and energy drinks for at least 4 hours before bed as it can keep you awake and affect the quality of your sleep.

**Avoid naps.** To make sure you are tired at bedtime choose rest over naps. If you are exhausted and need a nap, try to ensure it's shorter than an hour and before 3pm in the afternoon.

**Do not look at the time.** Checking the time when you are trying to get to sleep can make you feel more stressed about how much sleep has been lost.

**Create a great sleep space.** A quiet, cool and dark space is ideal. If it's noisy use ear plugs, or wear an eye mask if it's too bright. A comfy pillow or blanket may help you feel more cosy.

**Check your tummy.** Being too hungry or too full can affect your sleep. Have a light snack before bed or a glass of warm milk, milo or herbal tea.

**Create your own sleep ritual.** Calming activities like stretching, yoga or reading can help prepare your body for sleep. A hot shower or bath before bed can also help drop your body temperature afterwards, which can help induce sleep.

**Try sleep aids.** Sleep apps or calming music, lavender oil on your pillow, or a cooling sleep mask might be helpful. Ask friends for recommendations, you will be amazed at how many people struggle with sleep.

# Brain fog - what is it?

*'My memory is extremely frustrating, my mind feels disorganised all the time and I find it difficult to think as quickly as I used to.'*

Young person

Many young people talk about the 'brain fog' or 'chemo brain' after treatment. These symptoms include feeling **tired, disoriented or distracted**; forgetting about a task, taking longer than usual to complete a task; or experiencing headaches, memory problems, or lack of mental clarity.

If you are experiencing this, you may:

- Find it hard to learn new things
- Feel 'spaced out'
- Find it hard to get organised
- Struggle to find the right words when you speak
- Struggle to keep track of names, dates, or your schedule.

## Why does cancer treatment cause brain fog?

Although **cancer treatment** is partly to blame for how you feel, there may be other reasons, such as:

- Stress about your illness
- Other health conditions (like diabetes)
- Not eating a healthy diet or getting enough nutrients
- Other medicines you're taking
- Trouble sleeping
- Feeling very tired
- Hormone changes in your body.



If you are struggling with your memory, write 'to do' lists. Keep notes from appointments or meetings or bring someone along to your appointments to take notes for you.



# Managing brain fog

**If you are starting a job or returning to work, share your medical history and any challenges you are having with your employer, so they can offer assistance. They may be able to help by ensuring you have regular breaks to help with fatigue, or by being flexible around tasks that require longer periods of concentration.**



Most learning institutions have student support services that you can access.

## TIPS TO IMPROVE MEMORY AND BRAIN FUNCTION

**Meditate.** This involves focusing attention in a calm, controlled way and can help you declutter your mind.

**Visualisation.** The key to visualisation is to imagine the scene vividly and in as much detail as possible. For example: before going shopping, visualise how you will get to and from the shops and imagine what you will buy when you get there.

**Play games (i.e. cards, chess, or other board games), or complete a jigsaw.** Play with friends or whānau over a morning cuppa or after a meal.

**Play video games.** In particular play problem solving games that involve attention and cognitive flexibility (i.e. get your brain working). Remember not to do these too late at night so it doesn't interrupt your sleep

**Learn new skills.** Try sewing, arts and crafts, painting, photography, or learning a new language.

**Read.** Learn new words and increase your vocabulary.

**Listen to music.** Try playlists on platforms like Spotify, YouTube Music or iTunes. Relaxation music, classical music or chill out music are just some of the playlists available.

**Socialise.** Have discussions with mates, play games together, engage in sports or physical activity.

**Try some brainteasers.** Grab a magazine and do the word finds, crosswords or sudoku in them.

### APPS

**Lumosity** Daily brain-training exercises. Has both free and paid activities.

**Elevate** Maths, word and memory puzzles. Free and subscription options available.

**Peak** Brain training games to sharpen your memory, stay focused and problem solve. Free and paid options available.

**Brain Plus.** Classic riddles and puzzle collections.

**Sudoku/Solitaire/Crossword Apps.** Download one and use it when you are on the bus or listening to music.

### Self Check In

Yes / No

I have spoken with a healthcare professional about fatigue/brain fog and asked for assistance

I am aware of some of the apps and supports available to help me with memory and concentration

I have looked up the recommended websites and resources for more info

### Notes