World Physiotherapy
Europe region

Factsheet –
The Role of Physiotherapy in Cancer-Related Fatigue

Cancer Working Group

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FACTSHEET – THE ROLE OF PHYSIOTHERAPY IN CANCER-RELATED FATIGUE

Europe Region

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Cancer-related fatigue is often cited by patients as the most debilitating and disabling symptom during medical treatment and following its completion. Several reviews and meta-analysis have shown that exercise is effective in reducing fatigue and its impact in cancer patients and survivors. Physiotherapists can play an active role in educating and guiding patients through the management of cancer related fatigue and a referral to physiotherapy should be considered for these patients.

1. WHAT IS FATIGUE?

Cancer-related fatigue is a subjective multidimensional experience considered the most frequent symptom in all phases of cancer, that may appear at diagnosis and usually increases during the course of treatment. It is understood as a persistent or recurrent feeling of lack of energy and exhaustion on physical, emotional and/or cognitive domains not proportional to recent activity that interferes with functioning and overall quality of life. Its aetiology is not clear but predisposing factors (e.g., comorbidities, biological sex, genetic, body composition, cancer treatments, depression history), precipitating factors (e.g. metabolic dysregulation, systemic chronic inflammation, accelerated cells ageing), and perpetuating factors (e.g. modifiable lifestyle behaviours such as dietary pattern, physical activity level, etc.) have been described as contributing.

2. HOW DO YOU ASSESS FATIGUE?

It is important to assess fatigue and other symptoms accurately. Below are links to example ways of doing this. The European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) guidelines are a particularly helpful resource:

ESMO Interactive Guidelines http://www.npcrc.org/files/news/brief_fatigue_inventory.pdf

3. HOW CAN FATIGUE BE TREATED?

3.1 General Activity

Patients with cancer should be encouraged to be physically active as recommended for all adults.

Patients who are experiencing fatigue or other symptoms related to their cancer should be referred to a physiotherapist.

3.2 Physical exercise – Physiotherapy intervention

Current evidence has identified interventions with effect on multiple systems as the most effective in cancer related fatigue. Supervised interventions are more effective when the duration of the exercise programme is <12 weeks.

In particular, interventions supervised by an exercise professional were found to be more effective than unsupervised home programmes in promoting adherence to exercise, resulting in more significant improvements in fatigue and quality of life. Existing guidelines recommend screening for fatigue at various time frames of treatment and survivorship, as well as providing education and guidance.

- Time or phase of treatment: during and after cancer treatments.
- Type: for aerobic and resistance exercise and their combination (or concurrent exercise).
- Intensity: moderate to vigorous.
- Frequency: 2 to 3 times per week.
- Time or duration: Current evidence suggests greater reductions in fatigue with a session duration of 30 minutes or more and with 12 weeks or more of programme duration.
- Format: independent of the level of supervision and/or training environment.

3.3 Patient education

It is important to provide information and advice to the patient and caregivers about cancer-related fatigue, its prevention and management.

Tiredness (fatigue) | Macmillan Cancer Support

Evidence has shown that for patients with cancer, there is a positive effect on fatigue and Quality of Life (QoL) with self-management education.

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Members of the Cancer Working Group of the Europe Region of World Physiotherapy - 2022-2024:

Nele Adriaenssens	(Belgium)	
Marianne Himberg	(Finland)	
Gráinne Sheill	(Ireland)	
Nirit Rotem-Lehrer	(Israel)	
Loredana Gigli	(Italy)	
Līva Tiesnese	(Latvia)	(Lead)
Irene Cantarero	(Spain)	(Lead)
Alex MacKenzie	(United Kingdom)	(Lead)
Carmen Suárez	(Chair)	