



Physiotherapy and Side Effects of Cancer Treatments



Side effects are problems associated with cancer treatment. Treatments for cancer, such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, hormone therapy and supporting treatments like bone strengthening medications, blood and platelet transfusions can lead to numerous side effects which can affect the body, mind and cells of your body.

We in the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists want to help you to manage and cope with these side effects. In this leaflet, we will:

- Describe the common side effects
- Empower you to manage them well
- Keep in mind that side effects vary from person to person, even among people receiving the same kind of cancer treatment and can vary in severity

Fatigue

Fatigue is a very common side effect of cancer treatment. It can be described as feeling extremely tired, weak, heavy, run down or having no energy. Anemia (low blood counts/low red cells) can cause fatigue. Your healthcare team can help greatly with this cause of fatigue.

Cancer related fatigue does not always go away with rest and sleep but can be managed with the right guidance.

Here are some ways to manage fatigue, 5P's:

- **Prioritise:** choose activities that you value, choose a top 3 every day.
- **Plan:** how and when will I do these tasks? When do I have my highest peak of energy in the day?
- **Positioning:** what is the best way to position my body to accomplish the most work with the least use of energy?
- **Pacing:** how can I spread out my energy over time? A fatigue diary can also help you manage your fatigue and help to plan your day.
- **Protecting:** Give yourself permission to say no to a task and delegate to others.

Factors affecting fatigue

- Diet, exercise, pain, and stress all can have an impact on your fatigue.
- Eat and drink well.
- Light exercise can be energising and help you feel better.
- Pain can be a major cause of fatigue – speak with a specialist to help reduce your pain.
- Stress causes fatigue.
- Your specialist team of dieticians, physiotherapists, oncologists and counsellors can advise you on how to best manage your fatigue.

For more information, please read the ISCP leaflet 'Coping With Fatigue'.

Peripheral neuropathy (nerve damage)

Some cancer treatments cause peripheral neuropathy. This is damage to the nerves associated with the feet and hands. It can affect the sensation of the skin – you may feel tingling, numbness, burning or pins and needles.

Damage may also lead to weak or achy muscles, affecting your balance and mobility, or difficulty buttoning or opening jars with your hands. Peripheral neuropathy can be temporary during treatment or may last permanently after treatment.

Ways to manage problems related to nerve changes:

- Protect your feet by wearing footwear inside and outside.
- When it is cold, wear gloves and warm socks to protect the skin.
- Check your skin daily for cuts and scratches.
- Slow down and give yourself more time to do tasks and ask for help with heavy/difficult tasks.

Ask your healthcare team about pain medication, physiotherapy for mobility and falls management and complementary therapies such as massage, acupuncture, yoga and tai chi.

Oedema and Cancer Treatments

Oedema is a build up of fluid in your body's tissues. Signs include swelling of feet, ankles, legs, hands and arms, face or abdomen. Oedema can also build up in your organs and cause shortness of breath, cough or irregular heartbeat. It is important to tell your healthcare team if you notice swelling to help manage your symptoms.

Steps you can take to manage oedema:

- Get comfortable: Wear loose clothing that doesn't leave marks on your skin.
- Exercise: This helps to move fluid along to where it can drain away.
- Limit salt (sodium) in your diet.
- Take your medication: Your doctor may prescribe a water tablet, called a diuretic, which will remove water from your body.

Lymphoedema

This is a special type of swelling in which lymph fluid builds up in the body's tissues, usually an arm or leg but can affect any part of the body. It occurs when part of the lymph system is damaged or blocked either by surgery to remove lymph nodes, radiation therapy, or by cancer blocking lymph vessels.

Ways to manage lymphoedema:

- Contact your doctor or nurse if you notice swelling.
- Care for your skin by avoiding dry, cracked skin to prevent infection.
- Keep mobile to help fluid circulate in the body and maintain weight.
- A specialist lymphoedema therapist can assess your swelling, help you manage your lymphoedema through various treatments, speak to your team for a referral.



Changes in eating habits

Cancer treatments may lower your appetite, change the way food tastes, or smells and cause mouth and throat problems.

Ways to manage appetite loss include:

- Choose healthy and high nutrient foods, that are high in protein and calories, eat in small regular intervals.
- Make sure you drink plenty of liquids, this is important to prevent dehydration.
- Keep active. Your appetite may increase when you take a short walk every day.



A common thread to these side effects is that exercise can help.

For more information, read the **ISCP leaflet on Physical Activity Advice for those Living with and Beyond Cancer** .

If you notice a new pain in your calf or elsewhere in your leg, contact your healthcare team immediately, as it might be a Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT), which will need treatment as soon as possible.

Other Side-effects of Cancer Treatment

You may be experiencing a wide range of other side effects in addition to those discussed here. Be sure to speak with your healthcare team about them, so they can help you to manage them.

For more details on managing side effects of cancer treatment, please consult a Chartered Physiotherapist or visit: www.iscp.ie/find-a-physio

Your healthcare team can refer you to one based in hospital, community and in private practice. A Chartered Physiotherapist will liaise with your doctor to ensure continuity of care.

General Information

Chartered Physiotherapists in Oncology and Palliative Care work in hospitals and in the community, where treatment is covered under the public health service and in private practice where treatment costs can be fully or partially reimbursed through your insurance (check your individual policy). Tax relief may be claimed by filling in the Med1 form available from the Revenue Commissioners at www.revenue.ie

Getting Help

When you choose a Chartered Physiotherapist in Oncology or Palliative Care you can have the peace of mind in knowing that you are being treated by a university trained physiotherapist who is committed to the highest standards of ethical and clinical excellence.

The Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists acknowledges and thanks its Interest Group in Oncology and Palliative Care (CPOPC) for developing this leaflet

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