

Catherine West of Union, Neb., discusses strategies to alleviate fatigue with Dr. Berger. West is battling cancer for the third time.

by Vicky Cerino

Disease-related fatigue begins before treatment

Breast cancer is exhausting, even before chemotherapy treatments begin. Just ask anyone with the disease.

That's what Ann Berger, Ph.D., did and she found that in the days before their first chemotherapy treatment, women are most likely fatigued because of disrupted sleep and reduced activity.

"We found that women experiencing altered patterns of day activity, nighttime sleep, and fatigue previously thought to be due to chemotherapy, are actually already exhausted before receiving treatment," said Dr. Berger, Dorothy Hodges Olson Chair in Nursing, UNMC College of Nursing. "We found women are not going into chemotherapy in the best possible shape.

"It makes it that much more difficult to reduce the fatigue during treatment. If you start out with some fatigue, it will probably increase," said Dr. Berger, MSN, '84, Ph.D., '96.

Dr. Berger's study, published in the *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* in April 2007, evaluated 130 women with early stage breast cancer. It's the largest study to document the prevalence of fatigue associated with altered sleep and activity patterns before chemotherapy treatment.

"The findings tell us that at the time of surgery and in post operative visits, health care professionals have an ideal opportunity to teach people how to modify fatigue and improve their sleep after surgery," said Dr. Berger, principal investigator of the study.

Cancer-related fatigue can have a profound impact on an individual's life, with significant physical, emotional, social and economic consequences that may persist for months or even years after completing treatment.

Maria Perales, 39, was diagnosed in 2006 with breast cancer. She enrolled in the study to see if the fatigue she had before surgery and chemotherapy could be reduced. She followed the study's healthy eating plan. "It did help a lot because I wasn't spending so much time in bed. I could continue to work and raise my two children without all the fatigue."

Fatigue has long been accepted by health professionals and patients as a side effect of treatment. Between 70 percent to 95 percent of breast cancer patients experience fatigue while undergoing chemotherapy. By challenging the status quo, researchers are learning how to reduce fatigue.

Dr. Berger has been studying cancer-related fatigue for 15 years. In 2003, she and colleagues launched a \$1.5 million study funded by the National Institutes of Health that now is complete. Results will be published this year.

She said recent findings provide an important benchmark to begin looking for interventions to reduce cancer-related fatigue. Some of those interventions may include a regular bedtime and a regular wake-up time.

"If you're fatigued during the day and want to take naps, limit them to 45 minutes. Stop napping about four hours before going to bed, and in that interim time period, be as active as you can." ☺☺