Chemo Brain: Memory and Concentration Problems

Some cancer treatments can make it harder to think, concentrate, or remember things. People sometimes call this mental fog or chemo brain. It can start during or after treatment, and it ranges from very small changes to much greater problems. Your doctor can assess your symptoms and suggest ways to manage or treat them.

This page is for anyone having trouble thinking, focusing, or remembering during or after cancer treatment. It explains what causes chemo brain, ways to manage it, and when to get help.

The simple version

Some cancer treatments can make it harder to think, concentrate, or remember things. People sometimes describe this as a mental fog, or call it chemo brain.

These problems are a known side effect of cancer treatment—and there are ways to manage them. Whether you have memory or concentration problems depends on the type of treatment you receive, your age, and other health-related factors.

Which treatments can cause it

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy may cause difficulty with thinking, concentrating, or remembering things. So can some types of radiation therapy to the brain, and immunotherapy.

These cognitive problems may start during or after cancer treatment. And they don't look the same for everyone. Some people notice very small changes, such as a bit more difficulty remembering things. Others have much greater memory or concentration problems.

What your doctor can do

Your doctor will assess your symptoms and advise you about ways to manage or treat these problems.

Other conditions can play a part, too. Treating conditions such as poor nutrition, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and insomnia may also help with memory and concentration.

That's one reason it's so important to speak up. You or a family member should tell your health care team about any trouble remembering, thinking, or concentrating.

Ways to manage memory or concentration problems

For minor memory or concentration problems, there are practical steps you can take:

- **Plan your day.** Do the things that need the most concentration at the time of day when you feel best. Get extra rest and plenty of sleep at night. If you need to rest during the day, short naps of less than an hour are best—long naps can make it harder to sleep at night. Keep a daily routine.
- **Exercise your body and mind.** Exercise can help decrease stress and help you feel more alert. It releases endorphins—"feel-good chemicals" that give people a feeling of well-being. Ask your team what light physical exercises may be helpful for you. Mind–body practices such as meditation, or mental exercises such as puzzles and games, also help some people.
- **Get help to remember things.** Write down important information and keep the list handy. Use a daily planner, recorder, or other electronic device to help you remember important activities. Make a list of important names and phone numbers, and keep it in one place so it's easy to find.

Talking with your health care team

Prepare for your visit by making a list of questions to ask ahead of time. The "Questions to ask your healthcare team" list on this page is a good starting point.

Your team can also connect you with more support. You might ask to meet with a social worker for ideas about additional support and resources. You could also ask whether specialists—such as a neuropsychologist, an occupational therapist, or a vocational therapist—could assess, treat, or advise you on these problems.

When to get help sooner

Some changes in thinking need help faster than others. Use this list to decide who to call and how quickly.

- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** confusion arrives suddenly and comes with a fever, a bad headache, fast breathing, cold clammy skin, a fainting feeling, or any loss of consciousness. MedlinePlus says to call for emergency help (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003205.htm) in those situations, and for a first unexplained bout of confusion. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** confusion arrives within hours, or comes with a fever, a severe headache, weakness down one side, or a seizure. Confusion that fast can have a cause that is treated the same day it appears. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call your care team the same day if** clear thinking slips away over a day or two, rather than fading gradually. Muddled speech, not knowing the time or place, sudden restlessness or agitation, or a change in how awake someone seems are all part of that picture. The National Cancer Institute calls this delirium (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/memory/delirium-pdq),

and it is handled differently from the slow fog described on this page. If this is the first time, or it came on within hours, call 911 (see above).

- **Call your care team within a day or two if** the memory or concentration problems are steadily getting worse, or they now make it hard to keep track of medicines. The same goes if they make it hard to stay safe at home alone.

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/memory)

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Online: cancerexplained.org/side-effects/chemo-brain

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