



Chemo Brain – Memory and Concentration

Key Points

- Forgetfulness, poor concentration, lessened ability to multitask and difficulty processing information are some common symptoms of chemo brain.
- There are things you can do to strengthen your memory, stay organized and improve concentration.
- If living with chemobrain makes you anxious or sad, there are resources available to help you manage any emotional concerns or develop ways to cope.

Chemo brain refers to changes in your abilities to remember and think clearly as a result of cancer treatment. Originally, it was thought to be a result of chemotherapy, but studies show that patients having other types of treatment can have the same issues. Science is still looking for the cause(s). The effects can be a worsening of a pre-existing issue, or a new change in function. Some people get worse during treatment and then gradually improve when treatment ends. For others, the problems last a long time or become permanent.

Symptoms

- Forgetfulness, memory lapses, trouble recalling some words
- Problems concentrating or focusing
- Lessening or loss of the ability to do more than one thing at a time or to complete a task with multiple steps, difficulty with organization
- Taking longer to process information or instructions



Managing Symptoms

If you are finding it difficult to think clearly or having lapses of memory, try some of these tips.

- ✓ Start a journal to track the time and place you first experienced chemobrain, what you were doing at the time, your medications, how often you have symptoms and what makes them better or worse.
- ✓ Talk to your doctor (bring your journal). Ask if they know why you are having these issues, if they could be related to something that is treated more easily (electrolyte imbalance, low blood counts), and what you can do to improve things.
- ✓ Know your limitations. Complete one task (or step) at a time. Keep a positive attitude. Learn to ask for help. Some people use humor to help them through frustrating moments caused by forgetfulness or distraction.

Help with Memory

- ✓ Keep your mind active. Do word or number puzzles (Sudoku). It is likely that any brain stimulation may be helpful so play games, take a course, or join a book club.
- ✓ Be active. Regular physical activity and eating healthy foods is good for your body and can make you feel more alert.
- ✓ Sleep. Make sure you get plenty of rest. Fatigue can cause you to be less alert and focused.
- ✓ Tell your family member or friend what you are going through, so that they'll understand if you forget things. They may be able to help and encourage you.
- ✓ When you put something on the stove or in the oven, set a timer. If you have a smart phone, you can use the timer on the phone.
- ✓ Repeat information out loud after someone gives it to you and write down important points.

Get Organized

- ✓ Use a planner (paper pad, phone, or tablet) to create a place where you can write down what you need to do. Cross out tasks as you complete them. Use it to stay on top of your appointments, tasks, and special occasions.
- ✓ Organize your environment. Keep things in familiar places so you'll remember where they are. Put a basket by the front door for items you use every day like keys, cell phone, etc.
- ✓ Use sticky notes as reminders.
- ✓ A Navigation app or GPS are very handy and not just for long distance travel.



Improve Focus and Concentration

- ✓ Avoid distractions. Work, read, and do your thinking in an uncluttered, peaceful environment to help you focus.
- ✓ Have conversations in quiet places. This minimizes distractions and lets you concentrate better on what the other person is saying.
- ✓ Train yourself to focus. Take extra time to think about or picture what you're doing. Repeat things out loud to yourself. Hearing cues gives your memory an extra boost.

Who Can Help with Chemobrain?

- If living with symptoms of chemobrain makes you anxious or sad, contact Roswell Park's Social Work Department at **716-845-8022**, or ask for a referral to meet with a psychologist for further evaluation.
- *CancerCare* offers social workers to help you manage any emotional or practical concerns that may be causing chemobrain and help you develop ways to cope. To speak with a professional oncology social worker, free of charge, call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.
- *Neuropsychology* is concerned with how the brain and nervous system influence a person's mental processes and behaviors. Neuropsychologists focus on how illness or injury affects the brain and an individual's cognitive functions and behavior.