Getting Help for Chemo Brain

For years, cancer survivors have worried and even joked about the cloudy thinking they notice before, during, and after chemo. This mental fog is called chemo brain.

Some people have these symptoms even before they start treatment. So the term chemo brain may not be the best one to use, but it is what most people call it right now.

The brain usually recovers over time, but the mental changes cancer patients notice are real, not imagined. These changes can cause problems with school, work, or social activities.

What is chemo brain?

Research has shown that some cancer drugs can cause changes in the brain. These changes are in the parts of the brain that deal with things like memory, planning, and putting thoughts into action.

Here are just a few examples of what chemo brain may be like:

- Trouble remembering things you usually have no trouble recalling
- Trouble focusing on what you're doing and taking longer to finish things
- Trouble remembering details like names, dates, and events
- Trouble remembering common words
- Trouble doing more than one thing at a time, like answering the phone while cooking, without losing track of one of them

For some people, these changes come on fast and only last a short time. Others may have mild, long-term changes. In most cases, the changes are subtle, and others around the person with cancer may not even notice any changes at all. Still, the people who have problems are aware of the differences in their thinking. Many people do not tell their health care team about this problem until it affects their everyday life.

Can chemo brain be prevented?

We do not know what causes chemo brain, and at this time there is no way to prevent it. It seems to happen more with high doses of chemo. But because chemo brain is usually mild and goes away over time, treatment plans should not be changed to try to prevent this side effect.

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Things you can do to deal with chemo brain

Day-to-day coping

- ✔ Use a daily planner. Keep everything in one place to make it easier to find the reminders you may need. Keep track of appointments and schedules, to-do lists, important dates, phone numbers and addresses, meeting notes, and even movies you'd like to see or books you'd like to read.
- ✔ Exercise your brain. Take a class, do word puzzles, or learn to do something new.
- ✔ Get enough rest and sleep.
- ✔ Exercise your body. Regular physical activity is good for your body; it improves your mood, makes you feel more alert, and helps you feel less tired.
- ✔ Eat your veggies. Studies have shown that eating more vegetables can help you keep up your brain power.
- ✔ Set up and follow routines. Put the things you often lose in the same place each time you're done with them. Try to keep the same daily schedule.
- ✔ Don't try to multi-task. Focus on one thing at a time.
- ✔ Track your memory problems. Keep a diary of when you notice problems and the events that are going on at the time. (You might track this in your planner.) Medicines taken, time of day, and where you are may help you figure out what affects your memory. Keeping track of when the problems are worst can also help you prepare by not planning important talks or meetings during those times.
- ✔ Try not to focus on how much chemo brain is bothering you. Accepting the problem will help you deal with it. Patients say that being able to laugh about things you can't control can help you cope. And remember, you probably notice your problems much more than others do.

Telling others

Another thing you can do to better manage chemo brain is tell family, friends, and your health care team about it. Let them know what you are going through. It may help you feel better.

You are not stupid or crazy; you just have a side effect that you have to learn to manage. Even though this is not a change that is easy to see, like hair loss or skin changes, your loved ones may have noticed some things and may even be able to help you. For instance, your partner may notice that when you are rushed, you have more trouble finding things. Tell your loved ones what they can do to help. Their support and understanding can help you relax and make it easier for you to focus and pay attention.

Tell your health care team about the changes you are feeling. They may suggest you see a specialist who can work with you on ways to manage your memory or thinking problems.

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