

What Exactly Is ‘Chemo Brain’?

Some patients who are undergoing or have received chemotherapy notice a mental foggy, often referred to as ‘chemo brain’. Patients complain of not being able to find words when speaking. They walk into a room and forget why they were there. Some have problems with memory and increased tiredness. The fatigue is especially noticeable when learning new tasks or even when doing familiar things, like driving, but in unfamiliar locations.

These symptoms are real, and studies have shown that most people who receive chemotherapy will have some or all of the symptoms of ‘chemo brain’. Fortunately, for most patients, these problems go away with time.

The exact cause of chemo brain is not understood. We do know that damage to nerve cells in the brain happens with some chemotherapies, especially when given at high doses. However, because chemo brain gets better in most patients and is generally pretty mild, and chemotherapy is effective at slowing the growth of cancer, and can even cure it, treatment is worth the risk.

It is important to remember that many things are going on in a patient’s life when they are on chemotherapy. And some of these can also cause trouble with memory and concentration. For example, stress or depression from dealing with the diagnosis of cancer, can cause trouble with sleep. And, as anyone who has gone a night or two without sleep knows, ability to remember that grocery list the next day is pretty tough. Additionally, the medications used to control nausea and pain can cause mental fuzziness. Some patients develop anemia (low red blood cell counts) from the cancer or the chemotherapy. Anemia means less oxygen is getting to the body, including the brain, and this can cause tiredness and

trouble concentrating. This is just a short list, but as you can see, many factors are probably contributing to the side effect known as chemo brain.

Fortunately, there are many things patients can do to help themselves adjust to the difficulties of forgetfulness and lack of concentration. The first thing to do is tell family and friends that you are having trouble. Don’t be embarrassed, ashamed or reluctant to discuss your symptoms with your doctors or family. Ask friends and family to help out and explain that you have a temporary condition caused by medical treatment. Your doctor will have many suggestions for coping with side effects of treatment.

It is important to keep a planner or calendar with all appointments and events written down. Keep it in the same place all the time and refer to it often. Post reminders to yourself on refrigerators, mirrors, doors, TVs and other places you go each day. Also, exercise your brain. You can do this with crossword puzzles, word games and rhymes. If you use the internet, these games are available free throughout the AARP website, newspaper websites and general search engines. Don’t try to do multiple tasks at once; do one thing at a time. Studies have shown that a healthy diet with lots of vegetables, exercise and rest all improve brain power. Physical exercise can be walking, using a treadmill, working in a garden, swimming, golf or whatever activities and hobbies interest you.

Nothing will prevent the effects of chemotherapy known as chemo brain, but these are a few ways you can help yourself, your family and friends understand what is happening. By keeping your mind and body active, you can overcome some of the adverse effects which are causing difficulties.



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