

Understanding Chemo Brain

Cancer survivors commonly use the term "chemo brain" to describe difficulty thinking clearly after cancer treatment, even months or years later.

Doctors may refer to such concentration and memory problems as cognitive changes or [cognitive dysfunction](#) [1]. The chemo brain phenomenon is not well understood, but the frustrating symptoms are experienced by many patients who have received cancer treatment.

Symptoms

Symptoms or signs of chemo brain include:

- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Mental "fog" or disorientation
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty finding the "right word"
- Losing track of the rest of a planned sentence
- Difficulty comprehending what people are saying
- Difficulty completing tasks and multi-tasking
- Difficulty balancing a checkbook
- Difficulty with spatial orientation
- [Fatigue](#) [2]
- Mood swings
- Insomnia

The severity of the symptoms can vary depending on the person's age, stress level, and history of depression or anxiety.

Causes

Despite the name, it's not clear whether chemotherapy causes the symptoms of chemo brain. Some people who do not receive chemotherapy report similar symptoms. Other potential causes could include other cancer treatments, such as hormone therapy, immunotherapy, or radiation therapy; complications of cancer treatment, such as [anemia](#) [3], [infection](#) [4], or [sleep problems](#) [5]; emotional responses, such as [anxiety](#) [6] or [depression](#) [7]; or medications taken for symptoms, such as [pain](#) [8]. Of course, these same mental problems often occur with normal aging.

There are no definitive screening tests available to assess a patient's risk for chemo brain. However, researchers are studying the subject to determine ways to treat and prevent it.

Strategies to help with the effects of chemo brain

The following is a list of strategies that may help enhance your quality of life and keep you mentally sharp:

- Keep a log or checklist containing daily reminders. Put it in a convenient location, where you can look at it frequently throughout your day. If necessary, keep a duplicate copy at work.
- Take on one task at a time, and avoid distractions.
- Carry around a small pad, making it easy to write down reminders.
- Place a calendar in an easy-to-see location, and mark upcoming events and appointments.
- Place post-it notes around the house and workplace to remind you of important tasks.
- Use word play, such as rhyming, to help your memory.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Try yoga or meditation to relax and regain some mental clarity.
- Have someone accompany you to your doctors' visits. Don't be afraid to ask questions, even if you feel like you are repeating yourself. Keep a journal of your visits, and write down important facts that you discuss with your doctor. If it is too overwhelming, have the person who goes with you take notes and review them with you after the visit.
- Talk with your employer if you are having problems at work. Discuss potential ways your employer could support you, such as modifying workload and deadlines. Read more about [going back to work after cancer](#) [9].
- Prepare for the next day by setting out the things you will need the night before.
- Color code or label certain cabinets or drawers where you store things around your home.
- Put things—such as car keys—back in their designated place after you use them, so that they will be easy to find the next time you need them.

- Create an environment that is free of clutter.
- Keep important phone numbers easily displayed next to your phone, and carry a small address book in case you forget someone's number while you are out.

In addition, don't be afraid to ask your family and friends for help. If you need additional assistance to cope with the symptoms of chemo brain, talk with your doctor or other health care team members about [counseling](#) [10] and other resources.

More Information

[Emotional and Physical Matters](#) [11]

[Cognitive Problems](#) [1]

Additional resources

[CancerCare: Doctor, Can We Talk About Chemobrain?](#) [12]

[Mayo Clinic: Chemobrain](#) [13]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25044>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25048>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25916>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25256>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25058>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25481>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25480>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25259>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24549>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24558>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25109>

[12] http://www.cancer.org/pdf/fact_sheets/fs_chemobrain_doctor_talk.pdf

[13] <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/chemo-brain/DS01109>