

Chemobrain

What is chemobrain?

Chemobrain is a common term used to describe the cognitive problems that cancer survivors often face during and after chemotherapy. People sometimes use this term to describe cognitive symptoms that may arise from other types of cancer treatments, such as radiation therapy or hormone therapy. Cognitive problems occur when a person has trouble processing information. This includes mental tasks related to attention span, thinking, and short-term memory. These problems vary in severity and often make it hard to complete daily tasks. Lots of people with cancer have cognitive problems during chemotherapy. And many cancer survivors have issues that continue for months after finishing treatment. Usually, these symptoms slowly improve. In most people, symptoms disappear within 4 years.



What causes chemobrain?

Although the cause of chemobrain is not well understood, the most likely cause is the effect of chemotherapy on the brain. Hormonal changes are also likely to play a role.

What are the symptoms of chemobrain?

Cancer survivors with chemobrain have cognitive problems that prevent them from thinking clearly. Symptoms may include trouble concentrating or focusing, mental fog or disorientation, and difficulties with judgment or reasoning. Memory loss and forgetting certain things, especially names, dates, and numbers, are also symptoms of chemobrain. The intensity of these symptoms often depends on several factors. This includes a person's age, stress level, history of depression or anxiety, coping skills, and access to psychological support resources.

There is no specific laboratory or x-ray test that can be used to diagnose chemobrain. However, before assuming that new cognitive symptoms are a result of chemobrain, it is important to make sure that the symptom is not caused by a different condition related to cancer or its treatment. Examples of other causes of cognitive symptoms include anemia, electrolyte imbalances, sleep disturbances, fatigue, depression, previous brain surgery or cancer involving the brain, and other medications, particularly pain medicine. It is important to identify these causes of cognitive symptoms because many can be treated quickly and effectively.

How is chemobrain managed and treated?

There is no specific treatment for chemobrain, but several approaches are often effective in managing symptoms. These may include medications, occupational therapy to help with daily tasks and job-related skills, and cognitive training to help improve cognitive skills. There are also strategies to help cancer survivors better cope with attention, thinking, and memory difficulties, such as keeping a checklist of daily reminders, performing 1 task at a time, and using wordplay to help remember things. Try brain-strengthening mental activities, like solving crosswords or puzzles, painting, playing a musical instrument, or learning a new hobby. Get plenty of rest and make time for physical activity to increase mental alertness. Don't be afraid to ask your family and friends for help. Talk with your employer if you are having problems at work. Remember, the symptoms of chemobrain gradually improve in the large majority of cancer survivors after chemotherapy ends.

Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- What could be causing my cognitive problems?
- How long do symptoms usually last?
- What kinds of tests can help find the cause of my symptoms?
- Are there medications that can help treat chemobrain?
- Are there options that can help me manage chemobrain that doesn't involve medications?
- What strategies can I use to reduce or manage my cognitive problems?
- What should I do if chemobrain is causing problems at work or school?
- How can a palliative care specialist help improve my quality of life?
- Where can I find emotional support for myself and my family?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Find more questions to ask the health care team and tips to help manage chemobrain at www.cancer.net/chemobrain. For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Anemia:

A low level of red blood cells

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Cognitive problems:

When a person has trouble with attention, thinking, or memory

Counseling:

Talking with a trained mental health professional

Dehydration:

The loss of too much water from the body

Depression:

Having a low mood and/or feeling numb consistently for more than 2 weeks

Fatigue:

Cancer-related fatigue is a persistent feeling of physical, emotional, or mental tiredness or exhaustion related to cancer and/or its treatment.

Hormone therapy:

Treatment that blocks hormones that cause cancer cells to grow

Palliative care:

The relief of side effects, also called symptom management or supportive care

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays or other particles to destroy cancer cells

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