

# Memory changes and chemotherapy (chemo brain)



Memory changes are common with cancer and cancer treatments. This is sometimes called *chemo brain* or *chemo fog*. Health professionals describe these as *cognitive changes*.

People who experience 'chemo brain' may notice that they can't remember or think as clearly as they used to.

Changes may include:

- forgetting things like names, appointments and important dates
- trouble concentrating
- being disorganised and taking longer to finish things
- trouble finding words
- mood swings
- difficulty getting thoughts together
- problems making sense of information.

It is important that if you experience symptoms like these, you don't ignore them. Many people think their problems with concentrating or memory changes are related to the stress of having cancer or a normal part of ageing. If you notice changes in your memory tell your doctor or nurse.

## How long will it last?

Memory changes are often temporary and improve over time. Some people may notice changes to their memory and the way they think will continue after treatment has finished.

## What causes it?

It's not known exactly what causes chemo brain, but some possible causes are:

- having cancer
- having any type of cancer treatment
- taking medicines as part of cancer treatment e.g. steroids, anti-nausea medicines, pain killers
- side effects of treatment such as fatigue, poor nutrition, low blood counts or infection
- feelings of stress, anxiety or depression.

## Are there any medicines that can help?

Currently no medicines are available that treat memory changes.

### What to ask your doctor or nurse

- Will I have problems with concentration?
- What can I do to manage it?
- Am I able to sign important documents?
- Can I see someone to help me improve my concentration?

### Contact numbers:

Daytime: \_\_\_\_\_

Night/weekend: \_\_\_\_\_

### Ways to help manage memory changes

Some things you can do to help you manage memory changes are:

- keep a notepad, diary or phone handy to keep track of:
  - appointments
  - important dates and conversations
  - when to take medications
  - symptoms
- ask your pharmacist to organise your medicines in a multi-dose blister pack or similar packaging system
- set an alarm to remind you to take your medicines
- keep things like keys and phone in a usual place
- use post-it notes to help remember things and put them where you will notice them
- make lists of what you need to do each day, and do the more important things first
- avoid trying to do too much each day and focus on one thing at a time
- get enough rest, including a good night's sleep
- gentle exercise such as walking, yoga or tai chi can make you feel more alert
- try meditation, this can help improve focus and awareness
- when going to appointments:
  - make a list of questions to ask and issues you want to talk about
  - take someone with you
  - make notes or ask if you can record what is being said
- try to eat a healthy diet with plenty of vegetables
- drink up to 2 litres of water a day (unless your doctor has told you to limit your fluid intake)
- keep your mind active by doing puzzles, crosswords or word games
- ask for help if you need it.

### Tell others what is happening

You may find it easier to tell your family, friends and colleagues that you are having problems with thinking and concentration.

It is important to tell your doctor and cancer care team about any changes you have noticed. Ask if there is anyone they can refer you to for help.



### Relaxation

- Has been shown to reduce stress, and this may then help to improve your concentration
- Do activities that help you relax such as:
  - Going for a walk
  - Listening to music
  - Relaxation/meditation exercises
  - Spiritual practice
  - Yoga
  - Reading
  - Painting
  - Spending time with family and friends



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.