

## Cognitive Changes for the Cancer Survivor

Many patients experience mental clouding or foggy during and after cancer treatment, you may have heard this referred to as chemo brain.

Cognitive symptoms or chemo brain can be related to chemotherapy, or they may be caused by other issues that cancer patients and survivors commonly experience. Either way, researchers have found that the cognitive changes are real – not imagined – and for some patients they can cause problems in everyday life.

**Here are a few examples of what patients may experience with cognitive changes related to prior cancer treatment:**

- Trouble with memory, such as recalling details or events
- Problems remembering or finding common words in everyday conversation
- Trouble concentrating
- Taking longer to finish things; slower thinking and processing of information
- Having a hard time doing more than one thing at a time (multitasking)

Along with chemotherapy, other issues can cause cognitive problems:

- Tiredness or fatigue
- Low blood counts
- Aging
- Pain
- Difficulty sleeping
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Medicines you are taking to help with side effects of treatment
- Hormonal changes or hormonal treatments
- Other illnesses, such as high blood pressure or diabetes

Chemo brain is not considered a progressive condition. For most people, it gradually get better and disappears over time. Persistent, long-term symptoms are uncommon, but may occur in a small number of patients.

### When to get help?

An evaluation may be helpful if you completed active treatment (such as chemotherapy and/or radiation) more than six to nine months ago and you continue to experience cognitive changes that impact your quality of life or ability to function at home, school, or work.

## **How should I be evaluated?**

If you completed active treatment (such as chemotherapy and/or radiation) more than six to nine months ago and you continue to experience cognitive changes that impact your quality of life, you may want to ask your doctor about these options:

- Consultation with a psychiatrist: If you have anxiety, depression, or sleep problems in addition to cognitive changes, a psychiatry consultation may be helpful. A psychiatrist with expertise in cancer issues will assess your symptoms, help identify the most likely causes of your cognitive changes, and recommend treatment strategies.
- Neuropsychological testing: Your health care provider may refer you to a neuropsychologist for neuropsychological testing. This test will assess your cognitive skills in great detail, and the neuropsychologist will also give you recommendations for treating and coping with symptoms.

## **Strategies for treating and coping with your symptoms**

- Exercise your brain. Try word puzzles, sudoku, or learning a new language.
- Address anxiety, depression and sleep issues. Talk with your health care team about treatments that may help.
- Get organized. Use a daily planner. Keep a to-do list. Take notes. Follow a daily schedule.
- Focus on one activity at a time. Avoid multitasking.
- Optimize your health. Exercise regularly and follow a well-balanced diet.
- Find ways to reduce stress in your life. Ask for help when necessary.
- Cognitive rehabilitation. This is a professional program that will usually require a referral from your doctor.