

Chemobrain Management

What is it?

The term "chemobrain" has come to be used by cancer survivors to describe mental changes that are associated with chemotherapy treatments. Women and men who experience chemobrain typically say that they feel that they not able to concentrate, have a hard time remembering things, have trouble finding the right word when speaking or writing, or can't multitask the way they used to. For most people, there is an improvement over the first year or two following chemotherapy.

In medical jargon the effects of chemobrain are referred to as cognitive deficits or declining neuropsychological functioning.

Factors that may contribute to the chemobrain effect:

- Aging
- Depression
- Menopause
- Fatigue
- Medications
- Emotional upheaval of cancer.
- Physical debilitation
- Sleep disruption
- Low blood counts
- Stress

Strategies for managing chemobrain:

- Post reminders of tasks
- Keep a journal
- Join a support group
- Increase physical activity
- Ask for help
- Carry a personal calendar, write down all appointments and tasks to do
- Manage stress. Higher levels of stress hormones adversely affect mental acuity
- Use mnemonic devices (a formula or rhyme, used as an aid in remembering)
- Stimulate your mind: Mental activity increases the connections between brain cells and keeps the connections active. If brain cells aren't used regularly their connections will weaken. Brain-strengthening mental activities include reading, doing crossword puzzles, playing a musical instrument, painting, cooking, redecorating, woodwork, knitting or crocheting, needlework, writing journals or articles, and some computer games to name a few. Taking up a new hobby is one way to stimulate your brain through learning.
- Ask people to repeat information
- Avoid distraction
- Exercise your memory like a muscle
- Get plenty of sleep
- Write everything down, take notes during conversations

Even simple strategies, such as taking intermittent naps, writing notes, and taking special care to plan and organize activities, may be sufficient to effectively cope with symptoms.

You should definitely speak with your doctor about the problems you are experiencing to try to rule out other causes. Your doctor should review with you whether depression, side effects of medications that you are taking, or problems sleeping could be factors in the cognitive problems you are experiencing.