Memory or concentration

Changes in memory or concentration and the ability to think clearly during cancer treatment are often called chemo brain or chemo fog.

The symptoms were first linked to chemotherapy. But the term chemo brain can be misleading. Changes in memory and concentration can affect people with cancer who haven’t had chemotherapy.

The causes are unclear. Research suggests that it may be caused by a combination of factors, including cancer treatment, the cancer itself, side effects of treatment such as infection or anaemia, and emotions such as anxiety and depression.

The effects of chemo brain are usually temporary. But while they last, the symptoms can be frustrating and interfere with your normal activities. They may delay some people from going back to work, school or to social events.

Symptoms include:
  • difficulty concentrating
  • trouble remembering things
  • extreme tiredness
  • a feeling of mental ‘fogginess’.

Tips for coping with memory or concentration problems

• Keep a record of your symptoms to help you work out if certain things make your memory worse.
• Make lists, such as shopping lists or ‘to-do’ lists, so that you feel confident you won’t forget anything.
• Use Post-it® notes and put them where you can see them easily.
• Keep a calendar or diary, or use your mobile phone to help you remember important dates and appointments. Or carry a note book and make notes.
• Mental exercises, such as crosswords, word games and puzzles may help to improve your memory and concentration.
• Keep things simple – don’t take on too much.
• Develop a manageable daily routine and try to keep to it.
• Try to eat a healthy diet, take regular breaks and plenty of rest.
• Tell your family and friends so they can support you.
• Talk to your doctor or nurse – they can check for side effects of treatment (such as anaemia) that could be making things worse.
More information and support

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don’t have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

Visit macmillan.org.uk or call us on 0808 808 00 00, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.

Hard of hearing? Use textphone 0808 808 0121, or Text Relay. Speak another language? We have telephone interpreters. We provide information in a range of languages and formats. Visit macmillan.org.uk/otherformats or call us.