



CancerCare Chemobrain Information Series

## Cognitive Problems After Chemotherapy

Problems with memory and concentration, along with a general feeling of not functioning mentally as well as usual, are informally referred to by patients as **chemobrain**. Health care professionals call these symptoms **cognitive deficits**, from the word **cognition, which means thought**, and the word **deficit, which means falling short of**.

If you are experiencing these types of problems, you may be experiencing chemobrain, and you are not alone:

- Memory loss
- Trouble paying attention
- Trouble finding the right word
- Difficulty with new learning
- Difficulty managing daily activities

People often notice these problems during chemotherapy treatment. Within one year of treatment, many people find these difficulties greatly improve or no longer exist. However, for some people, chemobrain can continue for years following completion of treatment.

### Causes of Chemobrain

Researchers are uncertain of the exact causes of these difficulties, but they are currently studying this problem in order to find ways to both treat and prevent it.

The causes of long-lasting chemobrain (more than one year after treatment) are not known. However, there are a number of very treatable factors that can cause *temporary but similar problems* in people undergoing chemotherapy. These include:

- Low blood counts
- Stress
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fatigue and sleep disturbances
- Medication to treat side effects
- Hormonal changes resulting from some cancer treatments

So **tell your doctor** if you're having trouble with your memory or notice any other symptoms of chemobrain. He or she can help eliminate some of the factors that can also cause cognitive problems. For example, medication that treats nausea can make you less alert and affect your ability to think clearly. A simple change to your prescription may make a real difference in how you feel.

### **What Can You Do?**

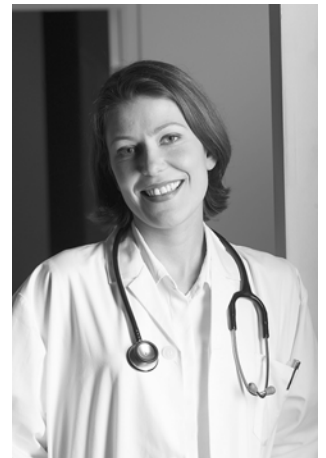
There are things you can do to help yourself. Please see CancerCare's fact sheet "Combating Chemobrain: Keeping your Memory Sharp" for helpful tips.

### **Neuropsychologists**

If one year has passed since you completed chemotherapy, and you have tried self-help techniques to cope but are still troubled by memory and related problems, you will need a professional evaluation. Professionals who are skilled at assessing and treating the symptoms of chemobrain are called **neuropsychologists**.

Neuropsychologists are psychologists with special training that prepares them to help people experiencing trouble in areas such as attention, new learning, organization and memory. These doctors will do a complete evaluation and determine if there are any treatable problems such as depression, anxiety, medication and fatigue. They also identify the areas in which you need assistance, as well as your areas of strength.

After their evaluation is complete, neuropsychologists may suggest **cognitive remediation** or **cognitive rehabilitation**. This process involves working with a professional on problem areas and developing a plan that helps improve your functioning so you can better manage your daily life. Remediation should also include practical ways to address your specific areas of concern.



### **How Do I Find a Neuropsychologist?**

Professional organizations can refer you to a qualified neuropsychologist. These are listed in the resource section of this handout. You can also ask your physician for a referral.

Once you have found a neuropsychologist, work with him or her to determine your insurance coverage for an evaluation and cognitive remediation. Some Medicare and Medicaid plans and private insurers pay for these services, but coverage varies, so it is important to have this information *before* deciding on a treatment plan.

### **What is The Role of Oncology Social Workers?**

Talking with a social worker who understands cancer issues can be very helpful. Oncology (cancer) social workers are trained to help individuals cope with the emotional impact of these types of problems. CancerCare's staff of professionally trained oncology social workers can work with you develop a plan to address these difficulties, including referrals to important

resources. We offer detailed advice on the telephone, online, or in person to help you improve your functioning on many levels. CancerCare also offers free counseling, education and financial assistance.

## **Resources for Patients with Cognitive Difficulties**

### **CancerCare**

[www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org)

CancerCare programs—including counseling, education, financial assistance and practical help—are provided by trained oncology social workers and are completely free of charge. We offer an online archive of Telephone Education Workshops on topics such as chemobrain and improving memory, along with a series chemobrain fact sheets.

### **American Board of Professional Psychology**

[www.abpp.org](http://www.abpp.org)

Best website to obtain the name of a highly qualified psychologist who is an expert in neuropsychology and in providing both evaluation and treatment to people experiencing problems in areas such as memory, concentration, new learning, prioritizing, and other difficulties associated with chemobrain.

### **American Psychological Association**

[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

Has consumer section on how to reach each state's psychological association. Every state has a referral service and can help you locate professionals with neuropsychology or rehabilitation medicine experience.

### **Neuropsychology Central**

[www.neuropsychologycentral.com](http://www.neuropsychologycentral.com)

Provides information on neuropsychology evaluation, online support, rehabilitation literature, and treatment.

### **CARF: The Rehabilitation Accreditation Commission**

[www.carf.org](http://www.carf.org)

Lists an accredited rehabilitation program in each state and qualifies programs in outpatient medical rehabilitation, occupational rehabilitation, and brain injury rehabilitation, all of which may be helpful to patients with chemotherapy-related cognitive deficits. These programs are also likely to have a rehabilitation specialist or neuropsychologist associated with them.

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