

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

21. Memory or concentration

Memory /Concentration

Some people notice changes in their memory or concentration, especially after chemotherapy – this is sometimes referred to as ‘chemo brain’ or ‘chemo fog’. However, it is not exactly clear what causes memory and concentration changes in people with cancer, so referring to them as chemo brain may not always be accurate.

Accordingly, Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) is a term often used by doctors. Symptoms include: being unusually disorganised; unable to focus on what you’re doing; trouble finding the right word; problems remembering facts you would usually remember; fatigue or extreme tiredness; mental ‘fogginess’; difficulty multi-tasking; taking longer than usual to complete simple tasks; and difficulty learning new skills.

Often these changes are very subtle, but they can still be a source of frustration and concern, and impact on quality of life. Such problems tend to gradually resolve within a year of treatment ending, but they can persist for much longer in some cases.

Key influences on memory or concentration in people with cancer:

- Cancer treatments, including chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, and radiotherapy.
- Side effects of cancer treatment such as infection, anaemia, or poor nutrition.
- Fatigue and sleeping problems.
- Emotional reactions to cancer and treatment – especially stress, anxiety and depression.
- Other factors such as age and non-cancer medicines (e.g. painkillers, anti-sickness medicine).

How can I manage these problems?

It is important to remember that difficulties with concentration and memory are entirely normal for people living with cancer and treatment. These are generally temporary problems and do not suggest any deterioration in your condition.

Strategies for improving attention and concentration:

- Minimise *external distractions* when you are trying to focus on something – e.g. find somewhere quiet; turn off the radio or TV; ask your family for an hour of uninterrupted time; avoid checking your mobile phone or email.
- Recognise and take care of *internal distractions* – e.g. if you are hungry, eat before starting a task; notice thoughts that pop into your head, but then consciously bring your attention back to the task in hand; keep a reminder pad handy so that you can jot down thoughts and get them off your mind.
- Divide tasks into manageable chunks – this will help you to feel a sense of accomplishment more often, which should help you stay motivated and persist with tasks.
- Plan regular breaks – e.g. make a hot drink or take a short walk to help clear your head; or even just stand up and walk around the room to bring your attention to the fact you’re losing focus, and then re-direct your thinking to the task at hand.
- Vary your activities – alternating between tasks of high and low interest will help to sustain your attention and concentration.

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Strategies for improving memory function:

- Keep life as simple as you can – think about your priorities and concentrate on one thing at a time. Develop routines – e.g. prepare the night before for the next day; get things ready that you will need; try to take medications, exercise etc. at the same time each day.
- Make lists and notes – carry a pad with you and write down things you need to do (e.g. ‘to do list’, shopping list, errands to run, phone calls to return etc.). Cross items off as you finish them. Write notes and stick them in places that will remind you to do things.
- Use a portable planner, personal organiser, or calendar (paper or electronic) – this can help you to stay on top of day-to-day tasks and keep track of appointments and events. Consider using alarm clocks and timers as reminders of important tasks (many mobile phones have alarms).
- Tell other people about the things you need to remember, so they can remind you if you forget (e.g. meeting someone at a certain time or place).
- Organize your environment and avoid distractions – work, read, and do your thinking in an uncluttered, peaceful environment. This can help you stay focused for longer periods of time. Keep things in familiar places so you’ll remember where they are.
- Have conversations in quiet places to help you to more effectively concentrate on, and retain, what the other person is saying.
- Keep as physically active as you can, eat well, and get plenty of rest and sleep – research suggests that these things help keep your memory working at its best.
- Let others help – delegate chores and say yes to people who offer practical support.
- Also, tell family members what coping strategies you are using so that they don’t accidentally disrupt your efforts.
- The worry associated with living with cancer can affect the ability to remember or concentrate, which in turn can cause more anxiety, frustration or anger. Talking to someone about your concerns can really help. This might be a family member or close friend, but you may find talking to a professional more helpful
- Other problems such as lack of sleep, fatigue or pain can also affect your ability to remember or concentrate, so finding a solution to these problems may also help significantly

Dementia

The symptoms of dementia can include:

Memory Problems:

People with dementia might have problems retaining new information. They may get lost in previously familiar places and may struggle with names. Relatives may notice that a person seems increasingly forgetful, misplacing things regularly. However many of us forget a name or face once in a while and this is nothing to worry about. If it happens on a frequent basis, it is advisable to visit your GP who can check why this may be happening.

Cognitive ability : i.e. processing information – People with dementia may have difficulty with time and place, for example, getting up in the middle of the night to go to work, even though they’re retired.

Also their concentration could be affected. There may be a difficulty when shopping with choosing the items and then paying for them. For some people with dementia the ability to reason and make decisions may also be affected. Some people with dementia get a sense of restlessness and prefer to keep moving than sit still; others may be reluctant to take part in activities they used to enjoy

Communication – People with dementia may repeat themselves often or have difficulty finding the right words. Reading and writing might become challenging. They might experience changes in personality and behaviour, mood swings, anxiety and depression. People with dementia can lose interest in seeing others socially. Following and engaging in conversation can be difficult and tiring, and so a formerly outgoing person might become quieter and more introverted. Their self-confidence might be affected.

Dementia can be seen as a combination of one, or all of the above symptoms. If you or someone you know is experiencing one or more of these symptoms, which have been occurring for a while and are progressively getting worse, then please arrange a visit to the GP. There are many other reasons someone might be experiencing confusion or memory problems, so it is best to get them checked out and treated if necessary.

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Local Resources:

<p>Memory Cafe Henry Williamson Room, Barnstaple Library , Tuly Street, Barnstaple, Devon EX31 1EL</p> <p>1st Friday of the month 10.00-12.00hrs</p> <p>Quiet Memory Cafe Henry Williamson Room, Barnstaple Library , Tuly Street, Barnstaple, Devon EX31 1EL</p> <p>3rd Friday of the month 10.00-12.00hrs</p>	<p>A chance to chat over coffee and cake and to help cafe users access help and advice on any concerns or worries they may have. Please note that 3rd Friday of month is particularly for hard of hearing – both groups are suitable for dementia patients and those with other memory problems. This group is facilitated by CAB. Telephone: Anne McKiernan 07855 837 077 or Email: memorycafe@ruraldevoncab.org.uk</p>
<p>Memory Café Assembly Rooms, Town Hall, East Street, South Molton EX36 3BU</p> <p>Monthly on a Thursday 10.30-12.30</p>	<p>Email: memorycafe@ruraldevoncab.org.uk Or visit http://www.ruraldevoncab.org.uk/projects/memory-cafe</p>
<p>Memory Café -Parkhouse Centre, Ergue-Gaberic Way, Bude Tel: Kim 01288 356060/Colin 01288 354906</p> <p>1st and 3rd Friday 2.00-4.00pm</p>	<p>The memory café is open to anyone worried about their memory or affected by dementia. It is place where family/carers can socialise, take part in meaningful activities, and enjoy 'home made cakes.' Email: colin.rita@talktalk.net</p>
<p>NEW! Dementia Support Café, Raleigh Galley, Level 0 North Devon District Hospital</p> <p>1st Wednesday of the month 2.00 — 4.00 pm 3rd Wednesday of the month 4.00 — 6.00 pm</p> <p>For more information, please contact Angela Walter by email at angelawalter@nhs.net or call her on 01271 313998</p>	<p>Dementia support café is a safe, social and welcoming environment where people living with dementia and those who care for them can talk to others with a shared understanding and shared experiences. Everyone is welcome – come and have some tea, cake and a chat, if you like! There will also be information to take away about services that can help.</p>

National Resources:

<p>NHS UK/NHS Choices Dementia Care</p>	<p>The NHS, social services and voluntary organisations can provide advice and support.</p>
<p>Dementia Hotline, Dementia UK - Call 0800 888 6678 or email: helpline@dementiauk.org</p>	<p>The support line is open Monday—Friday 9.00am-9.00pm Saturday/Sunday 9.00am— 5.00pm (excluding bank holidays)</p>
<p>Admiral Nurse Dementia Specialist supported by Dementia UK - Angela Walter based at NDDH.</p>	<p>Patient can be referred if there is a confirmed diagnosis of dementia. Available to support patients, relatives and carers who have concerns or difficulties because of dementia</p>
<p>Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 — 7 days a week 8am—8pm</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230</p>
<p>Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support-line</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday</p>

Other Resources :

<p>Macmillan Booklets:</p>	<p>A guide for patients living with cancer and dementia—MAC16126</p>
<p></p>	<p>Cancer and Dementia — A guide for carers- MAC16831</p>
<p>Further information:</p>	<p>www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/side-effects-and-symptoms/other-side-effects/chemo-brain.html</p>