

Dealing With 'Chemo Brain' at Work

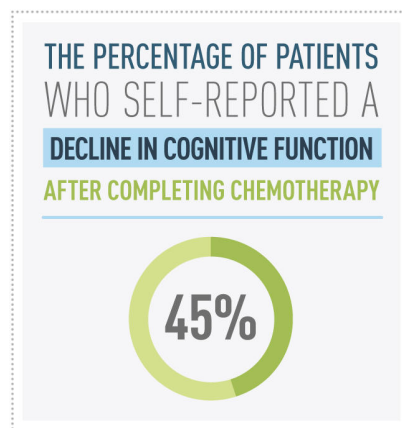
What is chemo brain?

Chemo brain refers to the cognitive impairment that can occur after cancer treatment. It's not limited to people who have chemotherapy (surgery and radiation can also contribute), but it's more noticeable if you have had it.

Common signs and symptoms of chemo brain are:

- Feeling disorganised or confused
- Feeling overwhelmed with task completion or managing once familiar tasks
- Difficulty concentrating/focusing
- Difficulty with word finding
- Difficulty multitasking
- Feeling of mental fogginess and/or fatigue
- Taking longer than usual to complete routine tasks
- Difficulty remembering details of a conversation
- Difficulty mentally 'holding onto' information (e.g., a list of words or numbers)

For most patients, chemo brain improves within 9-12 months after completing chemotherapy, but many people still have symptoms at the six-month mark. A smaller fraction of people (approximately 10-20%) may have long-term effects.



Source: Janelins MC et al., J Clin Oncol, 2016 Dec 28;JC0201668556

cancer.gov

Isabel remembers....

"I remember that after my chemo treatment I found it very hard to focus and to remember things. I was able to 'scan' the headlines of the newspaper but wouldn't remember anything about the content of the article.

Same when doing my shopping: with even only 3 items on the list I had to write them down. Another impact I noticed was the loss of my ability to multi-task. I used to be able to drive the car while having a conversation with the person next to me and thinking about 'what's for dinner tonight' at the same time. Right now, please don't distract me while driving as we will surely get lost!

Asking my oncologist at the time (2003) how long it would take to get better, the default answer was: 'We don't know, it will either get better or you will have to get used to it.'

I had to get used to it."

The impact of chemo brain on work

Many employees who have chemotherapy as part of their cancer treatment experience one or more of the above signs and symptoms. Experiencing this 'brain fog' will impact a person's ability to do their job and how quickly they make a successful return to work.

What can you do about it?

To help overcome these challenges, here is a list of things you can do. Pick and choose the ones that apply to you and use them as your strategy to deal with your chemo brain.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Eat healthily, have enough restorative sleep and regular breaks and exercise.

Ask for help

It might be harder to learn a new system or new instructions at work. Ask if they can repeat any explanation and receive a handout. This will help you to revisit new materials at your own pace.

Let go of the idea of multitasking

Research indicates that very few people (approximately 2%) can multi-task effectively, regardless of their health or age, so you're better off focusing on only one task at a time.

Use memory aids:

- **Write down your list of actions and priorities.** While it may sound simple, seeing your most critical tasks written down in order of importance can help you keep them top of mind, so nothing 'falls through the cracks'.
- **Use cheat sheets and/or phone scripts.** If there are certain parts of your job that are the same, day in and day out, consider creating a cheat sheet that lists all the steps you need to take to successfully execute that portion of your daily routine.
- **Take notes in a notebook or make a recording.** Unless you have a photographic memory, it can be difficult to absorb every element of a meeting/conversation/conference. So, take notes; doing so eliminates the need to remember everything off the top of your head and gives you something to refer back to. Keep your notes in a single notebook or planner and take it with you wherever you go. Another option is to seek permission to record a meeting, conversation or conference so that you can listen later on to what was said.

Break down bigger tasks into smaller tasks

When you're developing your to-do list, be specific about each component of the task, so you can tick them off one by one. This will help ensure you don't miss anything - and it has the added benefit of providing a sense of satisfaction upon completing each item. It can also help you feel more in control of things

Avoid distraction

Turning off the ring tone on your desk phone and mobile phone, as well as the notifications from emails and texts, can create an interruption-free space that will enable you to better

concentrate on the task at hand.

Reply to your email /answer phone calls at certain 'block-times' during the day.

Use your strengths

Try to (re)connect to your strengths; they are useful to fall back on when work becomes challenging.

Ask yourself: 'What are my strengths and how can I use them to support myself?'

Try building on the things you can still do well using your strengths: e.g., using your methodical qualities to file documents or using your persistence to finish tasks.

Avoid/reduce stress

Stressful situations can affect everyone's memory. Relaxation can help to reduce stress and may help to improve your memory and concentration. Do some activities that help you relax, such as listening to music, going for a walk, practicing mindfulness or anything that has a calming effect on you.

Focus on the full half of the glass

By nature, we tend to focus on and get frustrated about the things that don't work so well anymore (the empty half of the glass). This tends to feed a negative thinking pattern about yourself and your performance. Try instead to focus on what IS still working for you, the full half of the glass, and you will feel more positive about yourself and perform better.



Claim 'me-time'

If you work in an office-type environment that has a shared calendar, block off time on that calendar to work on specific projects; then let your boss and colleagues know that you'll be unavailable for a while. Indicating that you're "in a meeting" — even if it's with yourself — can minimize the chance of interruptions and alleviate the pressure of having to respond immediately to emails and phone calls.

Practice, and more practice

When memory is challenged, the act of rehearsing can be an extremely useful tool, especially if your job requires you to make presentations, client pitches or sales calls. Setting aside time to practice what you need to say can ensure a successful delivery.

Mental exercise

Memory exercises may help to train your brain and improve your memory and concentration. You can help keep your mind active by doing crosswords, word games or number puzzles like Sudoku.

Have realistic expectations

This applies not only to your expectations of yourself, but also to your expectations of others (e.g., your manager and colleagues).

And finally, accept you have chemo brain

You can experience feelings of anger, grief, frustration when you notice that your brain doesn't 'operate' as before cancer. Acknowledging that, after treatment, this is normal and part of the recovery process is a good starting point for acceptance.

So in summary, accept that certain tasks will take you longer and more effort and from the above tips, distil the strategy that works best for you.

And.....one additional strategy that often works well is to **remember and use, if you can, your sense of humour, even at the most trying of times:**

