

# Memory changes and chemotherapy (chemo brain)

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The aim of this information is to inform you, and those close to you, about memory changes you may experience during and after your chemotherapy and how to manage these symptoms.

## Questions about memory changes

Memory changes and having difficulty concentrating (called chemo brain) are a common side effect of chemotherapy. People describe chemo brain as if their minds are 'foggy', they have trouble concentrating and remembering details about their everyday lives.

It is important that if you experience symptoms like these, that you do not dismiss them. Many people think their problems with concentrating or memory changes are related to the stress of having cancer or a normal part of aging. If you notice changes in your memory tell your doctor; your doctor will develop a plan to help improve memory and problem solving, but will first rule out other possible causes such as fatigue, anaemia, stress and depression.

### What symptoms should I be aware of?

You may:

- experience short-term memory lapses, such as forgetting where you put your keys, forgetting names or faces of people you know (like family or close friends)
- have difficulty finding the right word in a conversation
- take longer to learn new things
- have problems making sense of information
- take longer to do tasks that were once quick and easy for you
- have problems performing more than one task at a time e.g. cooking dinner and talking at the same time.

### How long will the symptoms last?

For most patients, it may take up to a year for the foginess to clear and the memory capacity to return after finishing chemotherapy.

### Are there any medications that can help?

Currently no medications are available that treat memory changes associated with chemotherapy treatment. Several overseas clinical trials are in progress.

### What can I do to help manage chemo brain?

Experiencing difficulties with concentration and memory can be frightening and frustrating. Below is a list of simple things you can do to help:

#### 1. Develop ways to remember things

- Keep a note pad handy to jot down things you have to do and use a calendar or an electronic organiser to keep track of upcoming events and appointments.
- Take another person with you to your doctor's appointments; another set of ears can help you remember.
- Build a daily routine and stick to it. Tell your family and friends about your routine as they may be able to provide additional support.
- Place your house keys in the same location every day.
- Ask your pharmacist for a dose aid (e.g. a dosette box) to help you organise your medications according to when they should be taken each day. These come in various forms and you or your carer will need to fill this daily or weekly.
- Alternatively your pharmacist may be able to organise for your medications to be packaged into daily doses e.g. a Websterpak®. This is a medication packaging system that organises a week's worth of medication into individual compartments, making it easier to manage your medications and help prevent forgotten doses or double doses.
- Set an alarm to remind yourself to take your medications.
- Keep a diary of problems or side effects you may experience throughout your treatment to discuss with your doctor.

## 2. Exercise and Relaxation

- Try doing puzzles or learning activities to help exercise your mind.
- Set realistic goals that you can achieve each day.
- Gentle exercise such as walking can make you feel more alert.
- Socialising is also good for your memory.
- Try to get plenty of rest and sleep.

## 3. Communication

- Be open with your friends and family about what you're experiencing. Let them know your mind is moving a little slower and explain that they can help by being patient and repeating things if you don't understand them the first time around. This can help you relax and make it easier for you to think and process information.
- If you are forgetting people's name, don't feel embarrassed, tell them you are having problems remembering things at the moment.

This document is a guide only and cannot cover every possible situation. The health professionals caring for you should always consider your individual situation when making decisions about your care. Contact your cancer clinic staff or doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, or you are having problems coping with side effects. Use of this document is subject to eviQ's disclaimer available at [www.eviQ.org.au](http://www.eviQ.org.au)

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