Cognitive Changes (chemobrain)

Research shows that one in four people with cancer reports memory and attention problems after chemotherapy. This is sometimes called “chemobrain.” Many survivors describe this as “brain fog,” which can lead to problems paying attention, finding the right word, or remembering new things.

These effects can begin soon after treatment ends, or they may not appear until much later. They don’t always go away. If a person is older, it can be hard to tell whether these changes in memory and concentration are a result of treatment or of the aging process. Either way, some feel they just can’t focus as they once did. Research is starting to explore why some people develop problems with memory and concentration while others don’t. It seems that people who have had chemotherapy or have had radiation to the head area are at higher risk for these problems. People who had high doses of chemotherapy may have memory problems, but even those who had standard doses have reported memory changes.

Getting Help
Your doctor can help you with memory and concentration problems. Talk with him or her if:

- You are still having memory and thinking problems. You may want to ask about seeing a specialist (called a neuropsychologist) to help you with these problems.
- You think a medicine you are taking could be causing or adding to your problem.
- You think you suffer from depression or anxiety. These problems can affect attention, concentration, and memory.
- You are going through menopause. Some memory and concentration problems can be related to menopause.

Improving Memory and Concentration
Cancer survivors have found many ways to help improve their memory after cancer treatment. See if any of these ideas work for you:

- Jot it down. You can write down each task, how long it will take, and where you need to go in a notebook or pocket calendar. Plan your whole day. Keep it simple, and be realistic about how much you can do in a day.
- Set up reminders. Put small signs around the house to remind you of things to do, such as taking out the trash or locking the door.
- Group long numbers into chunks. For example, the phone number 812-5846 can be repeated as “eight-twelve, fifty-eight, forty-six.”
- Talk yourself through tasks. When doing a task with a number of steps,
such as cooking or working on a computer, whisper each step to yourself.

- Manage stress. Managing stress better may improve your memory and attention. And learning how to relax can help you remain calm even in stressful moments.

- Go over what you plan to say. Before you go to family events or work functions, go over names, dates, and key points you want to make.

- Repeat what you want to remember. Saying it a couple of times can help your mind hold on to the information.

**Works Cited**
Adapted from the American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org