

21. Memory or 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.

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 (*see Anger or frustration or Worry, fear or anxiety sections in this directory*). 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 (*see Sleep problems and/or nightmares, Fatigue, exhaustion or extreme tiredness, or Pain sections in this directory*).

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Counselling Service – Mustard Tree Confidential service in the Mustard Tree and the Triangle Centres is available to patients, their carers and their family.</p>	<p>Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre Level 3 Derriford Hospital, Tel: 01752 430060 Each appointment lasts approximately 1 hour and you will be offered an initial 6 complementary sessions</p>
<p>Livewell South West: Panic This workshop aims to break down some of the myths surrounding panic and help you to manage your panic attacks.</p> <p>Mindfulness Mindfulness practice can help you develop the ability to deal with life's pressures. Mindfulness meditation is a skill you can develop and a form of self-awareness training that helps you get to know yourself more fully, think more clearly and in the present moment.</p> <p>Managing Anxiety This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety and strategies to manage this including breathing, goal setting and cognitive behaviour therapy</p> <p>Managing Low Mood This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological symptoms of low mood as well as providing strategies to manage this</p> <p>Managing Stress This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p> <p>Sleep Feel, Feel Well Introduces ways to support restful sleep</p>	<p>Livewell South West: To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p>Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
<p>Other Resources</p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse or District Nurse.</p>

National Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Macmillan Cancer Support Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.</p>	<p>www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)</p>