DANBURY HOSPITAL
A Higher Level of Care

*Danbury Hospital Patient Education Sheet*

# How Cancer Therapies can Affect Your Mind

# Managing "Chemo Brain"

## What is so called "Chemo Brain"?

The term "chemo brain" is what some cancer survivors use to describe the feeling of mental fogginess or cloudiness that has developed for them before, during, and/or after chemotherapy treatment. The doctor may call this group of symptoms, a mild cognitive impairment or describe this as the cognitive effects of cancer and cancer treatment. Symptoms are often described as follows:

- Forgetting things or having memory lapses.
- Trouble concentrating or losing focus.
- Difficulty remembering details like names, dates, and sometimes larger events.
- Trouble with performing more than one task at a time ("multi-tasking")
- Taking longer to finish things - slowed thinking and processing speed.
- Difficulty recalling certain words when in conversation, but remembering them later.

Some people experience these symptoms for only a short time, while others have mild, long term cognitive changes.

## What is the underlying cause of these changes?

The cause or causes of so called "chemo brain" or mild cognitive impairment is unknown at this time. We don't know how it happens, what may trigger it, or what can be done to prevent it. In fact many doctors, researchers and patients themselves disagree on the term "Chemo Brain". They believe these cognitive changes are not just restricted to chemotherapy itself. Research is in progress through the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in an attempt to understand chemo brain /cognitive impairment better. Such causes may include any one or any combination of factors:

- The cancer itself
- Chemotherapy drugs
- Radiation therapy
- Other drugs used as part of treatment, including hormonal therapies
- Age
- Stress
- Low blood counts (anemia)
- Sleep problems
- Infection

- Depression
- Fatigue
- Hormone changes
- Anxiety

These cognitive changes are a real problem that affects both men and women. For most people, such symptoms resolve within a year of treatment. Talk to your doctor about any symptoms you may be experiencing.

## What can I do to manage these changes?

There are many resources that may help you manage such cognitive changes.

- Use a daily planner to help keep organized.
- Exercise your brain. Take a class, do word puzzles, or learn a new language. Games such as, Sudoku or scrabble are helpful.
- Exercise your body. Regular physical activity is good for your body, but it also may help you to feel more alert, improve your mood, and decreases fatigue.
- Speak with your healthcare provider about eating a healthy diet, as some doctors may advise cancer patients to avoid fruit and vegetables.
- Set up and follow routines or a set schedule. Keep items such as keys, glasses in the same place.
- Make a "to do" list , including when to take certain medications, errands etc.
- Keep a diary and track thoughts and problems as they arise.
- Limit distractions, such as the radio or TV in the background while you are focusing on a task. Do just one thing at a time.
- Be sure to tell your family and friends, as well as health care workers about what you are experiencing.

You may want to ask for a referral to a specialist who can help you learn ways to cope with this problem and work with you to manage changes in your memory or thinking abilities.

## Additional Resources

- National Cancer Institute (800-4-CANCER) www.cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society (800-ACS-2345) www.cancer.org
- American Psychological Association (APA) (800-374-2721)
- American Psychosocial Oncology Society (APOS)(866-276-7443) www.apos-society.org

**Notes/Additional Information:** _____

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Sources:
The American Cancer Society @ www.cancer.org
ASCO cancer.net