

# Chemo Brain: What it is and Ways to Manage

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## What it is

Chemo brain is a term used to describe problems with thinking that may happen, during or after cancer treatment. Many people say having chemo brain feels like their mind is in a fog. Even though it's called chemo brain, these problems can happen with chemo (chemotherapy), immunotherapy or radiation treatments to the head. Chemo brain can cause trouble with:

- Calling to mind things like names, dates and common words
- Getting things done on time
- Doing more than one thing at a time
- Paying attention
- Finding the right word to say
- Learning new things
- Keeping daily tasks in order
- Solving problems in your head, like keeping a checkbook balanced
- Matching up eye and hand movements, like hitting a nail with a hammer

## Why it happens

The cause of chemo brain is not known. People who have chemo, immunotherapy or radiation to the head may have a greater chance of having this problem. Certain chemo drugs and meds to help chemo side effects may change how the brain works. Other things like the cancer itself, low blood counts, trouble sleeping, sadness and stress can also cause problems with thinking.

For **most** people, chemo brain goes away or gets better within a year after treatment is over. For **some** people, chemo brain may get better slowly over time but never fully go away.

## What you can do about chemo brain

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you are having problems with thinking. Try these tips to help sharpen your thinking:

- Make lists, take notes or use a daily planner to help keep track of things.
- Use sticky notes, a dry erase board or phone alarms remind you to do things like taking out the trash or locking the door.
- Be aware of things that distract your thinking like TV noise or background music



- Keep the same routine each day. Keep things you use each day in the same place such as your purse, wallet, glasses and keys.
- Do one thing at a time. When doing a task with a lot of steps, like cooking or working on the computer, whisper each step to yourself to help keep focused.
- Repeat out loud the things that you want to remember. Saying something a couple times can help your mind hold on to it. Making up a song to remind you can also help.
- Work your brain by taking a class, doing puzzles or reading books.
- Get at least 8 hours a night sleep and take short naps during the day if you need to.
- Get some exercise daily. Get up and walk for 30 minutes each day. Walk 5 to 10 minutes at a time if 30 minutes at once is too much.
- Ask friends and loved ones for help when you need it. Cutting down on daily tasks can save your mental strength.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about seeing a speech therapist to help with chemo brain problems.



**Call your doctor or nurse right away if you have:**

- A very bad headache that is not helped by medicine and will not go away
- Throwing up (vomiting) for no reason
- Trouble speaking
- Trouble walking or keeping your balance
- Blurry or foggy eyesight




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This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your doctor's advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions.