

# Cancer Related Brain Fog

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Brain fog is one of the most frustrating side-effects of cancer. This resource provides information to help you understand and manage Brain Fog.

## Introduction

Cancer patients and survivors can be frustrated by the mental cloudiness they notice before, during, and after cancer treatment. This common cancer side effect is called Brain Fog or Chemo Brain. The term Chemo Brain can be misleading as chemotherapy is not the only cause of concentration and memory problems.

Brain fog is real. It is not imagined by patients. Brain fog might last a short time, or it might continue for years. Brain fog affects everyday life for many people with cancer.

Researchers are working to understand the memory changes that people with cancer can experience.

## What is Brain Fog?

Symptoms of Brain Fog can include:

- Forgetting things you usually have had no trouble remembering.
- Trouble concentrating, you cannot focus on what you are doing, have a short attention span, or you may feel “spaced out”.
- Trouble remembering names, dates and events.
- Trouble multi-tasking, being less able to do more than one thing at a time.
- Taking longer to finish things, feeling disorganized or having slower thinking.
- Feeling confused while trying to use a machine, like your washer or computer.
- Being unable to find the right words to finish a sentence.
- You may go from one room to another and forget why you went.

It is important to tell your Cancer Care Team as soon as you notice you have Brain Fog.

## What Causes Brain Fog?

Many cancer treatments can cause brain fog. Brain fog could be caused or affected by one or any combination of the following:

- The cancer itself.
- Cancer treatment.
- Other prescribed drugs used as part of treatment, such as steroids, anti-nausea, or pain medicines.
- Surgery and the drugs used during surgery (also called anesthesia).

- Pain.
- Depression.
- Stress, anxiety or worry.
- Low blood counts.
- Sleep problems.
- Infection.
- Tiredness.
- Hormone changes or hormone treatments.
- Other illnesses, such as diabetes or high blood pressure.
- Nutritional deficiencies.
- Age.

Most of these cause short-term problems which get better when the underlying problem is treated or goes away.

### **What are the Risk Factors for Brain Fog?**

Things that may increase the risk of brain fog include:

- Brain cancer.
- Chemotherapy given directly to the central nervous system.
- Chemotherapy combined with whole-brain radiation.
- Higher doses of chemotherapy or radiation.
- Radiation therapy to the brain.
- Younger age at time of cancer diagnosis and treatment.
- Aging.

### **What Can I Do to Manage Brain Fog?**

Here are some things that you can do to help you sharpen your mental abilities and manage Brain Fog:

- Use a daily planner or a calendar on your smart phone.
  - › Keeping everything in one place makes it easier to find your reminders.
  - › You may want to keep track of appointments and schedules, “to do” lists, important dates, websites, phone numbers and addresses.
- Exercise your brain by doing Suduko, crossword puzzles or other types of puzzles.
- Get enough rest and sleep.

- Get regular physical activity.
  - › Regular physical activity is good for your body, improves your mood, makes you feel more alert and can decrease fatigue.
- Eat lots of vegetables. Eating more vegetables is linked to keeping brain power as people age.
- Set up and follow routines, try to keep the same daily schedule.
- Pick a certain place for commonly lost objects, like your keys, and put them there every time.
- Focus on one thing at a time.
- Reduce distractions.
- Organize and declutter your space.
- Ask for help when you need it. Family and friends can help with daily tasks and help you save mental energy.
- Keep track of your memory problems.
  - › Keep a log of when you notice problems and what’s going on at the time.
  - › Note any drugs taken, the time of day and the situation you are in as this may help you identify what affects your memory.
  - › This log will be helpful when you talk with your doctor.
- Stay motivated and involved in activities you enjoy.

### **Talk with Your Doctor or Cancer Care Team**

Talk with your doctor to identify what is causing your brain fog and what can be done about it. Write down your questions about Brain Fog.

- Take your list of questions to your appointment along with your memory tracking log to discuss with your doctor.
  - › Ask what may be causing the problems, and find out if there is anything the doctor can do to help.
- Bring a list of all the drugs you take, including herbs, vitamins, supplements and those you take on an “as needed” basis, like an inhaler or nasal spray.
- Take a friend or family member with you to help you keep track of what is said during the visit and to remind you of your questions.
  - › They can also describe the changes they see that describe how your brain problems are affecting you.

- If your Brain Fog continues to cause you trouble, ask your doctor if you might be helped by a specialist such as a neuropsychologist, psychologist, occupational therapist or a speech language pathologist.
  - › These specialists can test you and recommend some strategies to manage your brain fog, also called cognitive rehabilitation.

### **Where Can I Learn More?**

- You can watch the video session on Brain Fog by clicking the link below:
  - › <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4902954/video/21131214>
- Visit the Wellspring website for online programs.
  - › <https://wellspring.ca/online-programs>
- Call the Canadian Cancer Society's Cancer Information Service 1-888-939-3333.
- Visit the Cancer and Work Website:
  - › <https://www.cancerandwork.ca/survivors/cancers-impact-on-return-to-work/effects-cognitive/>
- Visit your local library and borrow one of the books the NSH Cancer Care Program has placed in libraries across Nova Scotia such as:
  - › After You Ring the Bell... Ten Key Challenges for the Cancer Survivor
  - › Beyond Survivorship
  - › The Essential Cancer Treatment Nutrition Guide and Cookbook
  - › The Healing Journey – Overcoming the Crisis of Cancer



### Looking for more health information?

Find this brochure and all our patient resources here: <http://library.nshealth.ca/cancer>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider. The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.