

Forgetfulness

What is it?

Chemotherapy can cause *cognitive deficits*, such as forgetfulness and an inability to concentrate. Often called “chemo brain,” it is a very real condition that may last for months or longer after your final treatment. The condition has been identified in patients treated for a variety of cancers, and seems to be more prevalent in those treated with a combination of cyclophosphamide, methotrexate, and fluorouracil (CMF). It is also associated with brain radiotherapy, stress, and lack of sleep.

What are the symptoms?

Cognitive deficits are problems with thinking, learning, and memory. If you have cognitive deficits, you may be forgetful or have difficulty concentrating.

How is it diagnosed?

Cognitive deficits are diagnosed based on a description of your symptoms.

How is it treated?

Although there are no proven treatments for cognitive deficits associated with chemotherapy, the following drugs may help:

- Aranesp® (darbepoetin alfa) or Procrit® (epoetin alfa) provide *erythropoietin*, which stimulates the production of red blood cells. These drugs are typically prescribed for anemia, which can contribute to forgetfulness. A few small studies find these drugs can prevent cognitive deficits during and after chemotherapy, possibly because it protects brain cells from the damaging effects of chemotherapy.
- Ritalin® (*methylphenidate*). This stimulant drug, typically used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), has been used to prevent and treat cognitive deficits in children undergoing chemotherapy. It can also be prescribed for adults.



Tips to Help

Even if you can't eliminate the cognitive problems, there are things you can do to reduce their disruption on your life, including:

- Minimize distractions when you need to complete tasks that require concentration.
- Use a daily organizer to help you remember appointments and to-do lists.
- Only do one task at a time; stop multitasking.
- Keep a journal of daily events and activities.
- Carry a notebook to write down important information you want to remember.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Exercise daily.
- Manage stress.

Words to Know

Cognitive deficits: Problems with thinking, learning, and memory. Some people experience cognitive deficits as a result of chemotherapy.

Erythropoietin: A chemical the body produces to stimulate the production of red blood cells.

Ritalin (methylphenidate): A stimulant drug, typically used to treat ADHD, that has been used to prevent and treat cognitive deficits in children undergoing chemotherapy.