Ibuprofen Joins Exercise as Another Option to Ease Chemo Brain, Clinical Trial Shows

While Ibuprofen alone was effective, the over-the-counter drug showed the best improvements in conjunction with exercise.

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Researchers previously established that exercise may reverse some of the cognitive symptoms associated with "chemo brain," which may arise from cancer and treatment and include deficits in memory, mental processing speed and executive function. Now, results from a Phase II clinical trial published in Cancer suggests that a low dose of over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drug ibuprofen, alone and alongside exercise, reduces cancer related cognitive impairment.

"We are encouraged by the findings of this trial that suggest possible benefits of both interventions for some cognitive domains. Clearly, we saw a more pronounced effect with exercise, which is notable considering the multiple health benefits of exercise for cancer survivors," said lead study author, Michelle Janelsins, PhD, MDH, in a University of Rochester press release.

"Chemo brain," or cancer related cognitive impairment, is characterized by brain fog, memory loss, focus issues and trouble multitasking. About 75% of cancer patients experience cognitive impairment during or after treatment, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

Exercise for Cancer Patients (EXCAP) is an exercise prescription, which includes individually tailored walking and simple resistance band exercises, and it has been shown to reduce cognitive impairment in those receiving chemotherapy on a two-week cycle.

In the most recent six week study, 86 patients with cancer who were receiving chemotherapy and reporting cognitive issues were given a six week course of ibuprofen or a placebo drug, 200 mg taken twice daily. Half of those taking ibuprofen or the placebo drug were also asked to exercise, using a 6-week EXCAP program.

Patients in the ibuprofen or EXCAP plus placebo groups showed better attention than those who received only the placebo drug. The group that received exercise plus ibuprofen had the greatest improvements, which were reportedly noticeable by friends and family.

“This is one of the first studies specifically designed to assess these interventions for cancer-related cognitive impairment during chemotherapy in patients with multiple diseases using both performance-based cognitive assessments and patient-reported outcomes,” Janelsins said.

Phase 3 trials by Janelsins and her team will look at different durations of exercise and doses of ibuprofen.

For more information on cognitive decline related to chemotherapy, visit #chemo brain and #brain fog. You’ll find articles such as “Bucket Lists and Chemo Brain,” a first-person essay by Jackie Landry, who didn’t let breast cancer and side effects deter her from life goals of living in France and learning the language.

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