

Lift the Brain Fog That Arises From Cancer Treatment

Cancer treatment may lead to cognitive impairment, such as memory loss and trouble concentrating. But you can mend your mind.

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We've all experienced the frustration and embarrassment of forgetting a name. While cognitive decline is an acknowledged aspect of the aging process, mental impairment, such as trouble concentrating, confusion and memory loss, can also occur during periodic stress, including illness. It's so common during cancer treatment that there's a phrase for it—chemo brain—and it can last as long as a year after treatment.

Chemo brain is usually not caused by meds directly harming the brain—most chemotherapy drugs cannot cross the blood-brain barrier. Instead, cognitive side effects may result from fatigue, inflammation and stress on the body and mind. Such problems can arise from radiation, surgery and other aspects of cancer treatment. Poor sleep, inactivity and an unhealthy diet can worsen cognitive function.

Conversely, taking small but consistent actions and engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviors can help you prevent, mitigate and recover from chemo brain. Plus, doing so can boost your quality of life, lower your risk for chronic disease and improve your overall well-being. To further help lift brain fog, try the five steps below. Start slow—don't undertake all at once—and use reminders such as alarms and Post-it notes or ask your loved ones and caregivers to keep you accountable.

Start Your Day in the Light

Your morning routine is one of the critical bookends of your sleep routine. Getting sunlight (or even switching on your lights) within 20 minutes after waking helps reset our circadian rhythm, prepares us for the next night's sleep and stimulates our brain to produce serotonin (our feel-good hormone), setting us up for a better day.

Drink Up!

Our bodies lose water overnight through the humidity in our breath—and through our skin and sweat—which means we wake up a little dehydrated. While caffeine can get us going, so can water. Daily fluid needs vary from person to person, but hydration keeps us all energized and healthy.

Time Your Inactivity

While it may feel good to relax on your couch, if you shut down your brain and body too long, it's harder to start back up. Set your timer for one hour when you need rest. When it goes off, do something for one minute that is either physical or mental. Get moving or tackle one task on your to-do-list, then rest for the next hour.

Minimize Sugar and Highly Processed Foods

Fast food, sodas, desserts and candy lack omega fats, B vitamins and fiber—nutrients that support brain health. They lead to inflammation, energy highs and lows, and weight gain. Reduce these to one to two meals or snacks per week. Ultra-processed foods are also linked to a higher risk for cancer.

Train Your Brain

Engage your noggin with fun games that challenge your creativity, memory and decision-making skills. Try puzzles, cards or coloring games on an app (many are available for free) or at your kitchen table. Websites such as Lumosity.com and BrainHQ.com offer research-based cognitive training resources.