Article Series Mental Health

Your Chemo Brain Survival Kit

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Chemo brain isn’t all in your head. Many people going through cancer notice changes in how they think and remember. You might feel a little foggy, forgetful, or find it harder to focus and make decisions. Sometimes the frustrations of chemo brain spill into daily life, making work, planning, or conversations harder.

This guide is here to support you in understanding what’s going on and give you simple, practical steps to help you clear the fog and feel more in control.

Common signs of chemo brain

Why it happens

Even though it’s often called “chemo brain,” people living with cancer may experience concentration and memory changes for a variety of reasons, even if they haven’t had chemotherapy. The changes could happen as a side effect of other treatments, such as radiotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy or surgery. Or, having cancer could cause anxiety, stress, pain, sleep issues or other symptoms that contribute to concentration and memory changes.

Microsteps for health

Moving your body

Moving more may lift your mood and improve your thinking and focus. It may also help you deal with stress and feel more alert and less tired.

Mind-body exercises

Research shows that pairing movement with mental focus, such as practicing yoga, tai chi, or qi gong, may help improve cognitive functions such as word recall, focus and thinking.

Playing brain games

Keep your brain active by doing memory and thinking exercises – such as playing games or doing puzzles or crosswords.

Microsteps to keep you organized

Setting up a ‘landing zone’ to keep track of important items such as keys, wallet, and glasses.

Designating a shelf or small basket near your entry way may reduce the stress of searching for lost items and help you feel more in control.

Trying to stick to a routine every day
Consistency may help train your brain and reduce the strain of decision-making.

Finding a memory aid that works for you.
Sticky notes, calendars, phone apps and notebooks can help you keep track of events, dates, appointments, and your to-do lists.

Creating a medical binder.
Keeping medication lists, hospital paperwork, insurance forms and bills all in one place makes it easier to find what you need quickly and lowers the risk of missing important details.

Picking one day each week to sort your medications into a pillbox or organizer.
This simple routine helps prevent missed doses and gives you peace of mind that you're staying on track. If there's anything else you can do to tee yourself up for the week, you may like to group tasks and get them done in one go.

Carrying a notebook or using a phone app to record memory lapses or foggy moments as they happen.
Detailing the time of day or what you were doing can help your care team identify symptom patterns and offer better support.

Asking a friend or family member to come with you to medical visits.
They can remind you of questions to ask and help keep track of what's been spoken about.

Joining a support group to learn helpful coping strategies.
Knowing you're not alone can reduce frustration and provide helpful coping

strategies. You can search for support groups online or ask your healthcare team to point you in the right direction.

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