



LIVEWELL CANCER SURVIVORSHIP PROGRAM

Cognitive Changes

What is it?

Cognitive changes are issues related to thinking, reasoning, concentrating, and remembering. After treatment for cancer (surgery, radiation, and/or chemotherapy), some people have reported a change in cognitive abilities. You may notice this as a change in your ability to stay focused on a task, remember events or names, or find the right words, among other things. Although chemotherapy is usually blamed for these cognitive changes, there are many factors, such as hormonal changes, anxiety, fatigue, depression, medications, other diseases or treatments, stress, and sleep problems, which contribute to these often temporary, but occasionally long-term distressing effects.

What YOU can do

There is limited evidence for effective treatment of cognitive changes, but there are some coping strategies and tips that may be helpful.

Keep a journal to help you identify trends about cognitive changes – write down what happened, where you were, and what you were doing. This will help you to identify things that could be contributing to cognitive problems, such as when you have not had enough sleep, when you experience stress, or when you are trying to multitask.

- Try to get adequate, consistent sleep at night
- Be open to asking others for help when you feel stressed or are having difficulty accomplishing tasks
- Log all appointments and events on a calendar (paper and/or electronic)
- Keep a notepad with your phone and in your car and write notes about conversations
- Make lists, focus on one item at a time on your list and finish it first before going to the next item
- While working on important things, avoid interruptions by turning off the ringer on phones and not answering phone calls, texts, and emails
- Keep a notepad nearby to write things that pop into your mind so that you can return to them later, then resume working on the task at hand
- Use mobile phones or other electronic devices to send yourself reminders
- Ask people to send you an email or phone message as a reminder of their request when your conversation with them is at a time when you are focusing on something else and feel distracted
- Use a global positioning system (GPS) device when driving – this may help keep you focused on your destination and avoid missing turns

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What YOU can do, continued

- Keep items that you use or take with you frequently in an assigned place and leave yourself visual clues
 - Place hooks for keys and purse/work bag next to the door that you generally enter and make it a habit to always place them on the hook when you come home
 - Place a basket near that door to place items that need to be taken with you when you leave
 - Put a note on the exit door to remind yourself about important items or tasks
- Exercise may help you sleep better and fight fatigue, which may in turn help you with cognitive issues – consult your doctor about appropriate exercises for you
- Keep your doctors informed about any cognitive difficulties you experience so that they can evaluate and treat possible underlying issues such as hormonal changes, stress, anxiety, fatigue, depression, or sleep disturbances

What your doctor may recommend

- Testing to rule out potentially treatable factors, such as sleep apnea, anemia, thyroid imbalance or vitamin deficiency, or other conditions
- Evaluation to determine the severity and type of changes with a referral for neuropsychological testing
- Medications to treat underlying problems or to directly treat attention and concentration
- Consultation with a psychologist to help relieve any stress, anxiety, or depression you may be feeling
 - The Department of Psycho-Oncology at UPMC CancerCenter can be reached at 412-623-5888 or www.upmccancercenter.com/behavmed

Resources

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Hillman Cancer Center
412-692-4724

UPMCCancerCenter.com/livewell

Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC
412-641-4530 ext. 1

UPMC.com/MageeLiveWell

UPMC Passavant
412-748-5762

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