



SHARSHERET®

The Jewish Breast & Ovarian Cancer Community

**Cancer Brain Fog Webinar
January 12th, 2021
With Kathleen Van Dyk, PhD,
UCLA Assistant Professor and Neuropsychologist**

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Always seek the advice of your physician or qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

The following information is provided by Kathleen Van Dyk, PhD as follow up to questions received during the program. Please note that she answered all questions to the best of her ability and if you have further questions, you can contact Sharsheret or consult your medical provider.

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Remaining Questions:

Does everyone who has cancer experience chemo fog or just some?

No, not everyone. From what we know based on surveys, it's not uncommon to experience "fogginess" during treatment (e.g., chemo), and for many those symptoms get better with time.

How do I convince my partner my symptoms are real?

I'm sorry to anyone who has had to deal with another person doubting the validity of their cognitive symptoms. As I mentioned in the talk, because symptoms can appear subtle on the outside (but certainly not necessarily feel subtle to the person) I know they can unfortunately be dismissed by others sometimes. I might help to point the person to any of the research or websites that discuss these symptoms, for example this one from the National Cancer Institute:

<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/memory/cognitive-impairment-pdq>

We received many questions about additional ways to improve or prevent brain fog:

- Diet changes/foods
- Natural supplements (not prescription)
- Integrative medicine
- Prescription drugs

Unfortunately, there hasn't been much conclusive evidence in terms of treatment to establish standard practices. Broadly speaking, what I tend to tell patients is to try to do the things that we know in general are good for brain health: good nutrition, regular exercise, stress management (e.g., meditation, yoga), and treating any possible contributing factors if possible, such as sleep problems and depression. If available to you, cognitive rehabilitation has been shown to improve symptoms in some studies as well.

Do you have any specific recommendations for managing and living with cognitive effects for those with metastatic disease who are in continuous treatment?

Unfortunately, there hasn't been much research – yet – in cognitive symptoms among those with metastatic disease. One additional consideration might be timing – working around times when

you anticipate feeling less sharp or more fatigued. And, across the board, a healthy dose of self-kindness.

We received many questions about other types of treatment (PARP Inhibitors, Aromatase Inhibitors, anesthesia, etc.); can all of them also cause brain fog? Do different types of chemo have different levels of impact on brain fog?

While we generally think that chemotherapy is one of the bigger risk factors, studies have reported cognitive symptoms across several treatments, including radiation, surgery (and general anesthesia), endocrine therapies like tamoxifen and aromatase inhibitors, and there are new studies looking at immunotherapy. It's important to remember that not everyone experiences these symptoms and to have discussions about risk with your doctor while treatment planning.

I am feeling the effects of "chemo brain" one year since my last chemotherapy infusion. My grandmother had Alzheimer's. Do my chemo brain symptoms increase my risk of developing Alzheimer's?

You are not alone – many with a family history of Alzheimer's disease share this concern. Researchers are actively looking into this but so far there isn't conclusive evidence to suggest that there is a link between cancer-related cognitive impairment and risk for developing Alzheimer's disease. In fact, there are several studies that have seen an inverse relationship between cancer and Alzheimer's disease that is still being studied (i.e., looking at groups of individuals with Alzheimer's disease you are less likely to find cancer diagnoses and vice versa).

We received many questions about the length/timing: Does brain fog have to have onset during treatment to be considered cancer-related or can onset happen after treatment? How long is brain fog expected to last? Does it ever completely go away? Can it last over 20 years past chemo? Usually we think about waiting at least a year until after treatment to see if symptoms improve – it can be a slow recovery for some. For others, symptoms might improve but the person doesn't feel like they are back to their "baseline" functioning for some time, and it might not go away. Some studies have found worse cognitive functioning for several years, up to 20 years, after treatment is over. We're not sure why some people experience worse/longer symptoms than others but researchers are trying to figure out who is at risk.

When is it time to wonder if it's something more than just brain fog and have an MRI?

This is a hard question to give a single answer to; in general, it's always best to discuss your concerns with your doctor get their advice.

Please click this [link](#) to view the full recording of the webinar.

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Sharsheret's genetic counselor,
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