Managing the Effects of “Chemo Brain”

Kamela Kleppe Yeager, MS, CCC–SLP
Speech–Language Pathologist
Unity Point Health–Des Moines
Outpatient Therapy, Penn Medical Place
Objectives

- Introduction to Chemo Brain workshops
- Define “Chemo Brain”
- Identify Signs and Symptoms of chemotherapy induced cognitive impairments.
- Outline basic strategies for management.
- Help providers recognize when additional services might be warranted and how to refer.
Workshops or classes are now being periodically offered to cancer survivors and their caregivers.

- About one and a half hours long.
- Small groups of about 16 participants
- Cover symptoms, education about underlying problem, management strategies, and ways to get more help if needed.
Chemotherapy induced cognitive impairments
  o “Foggy–headed”
  o Poor memory
  o Trouble concentrating
  o Short attention span
  o Disorganized
  o Trouble multi–tasking
  o Word–finding problems
State of the Science of Chemo Brain

- Statistics are not clear
- Confounding factors make study difficult
  - Anxiety/depression
  - Normal aging
  - Other health issues
  - Sleep disorders
  - Medications
  - Etc.
What’s Chemo Brain Look Like?

- Usually mild symptoms
- Usually improve without specific treatment over time
- At least some cancer survivors have long-term changes to their thinking skills
Brain Exercises—mixed results, no clear evidence either for or against brain exercises

Management techniques/strategies DO improve function
Management Strategies for Attention/Concentration

- Eliminate distractions in the environment
  - Turn off radio/TV
  - Shut doors
  - Turn off room lights and illuminate only the desk/table
  - Pull curtains/shades
  - Orient the desk away from the open door or open room
  - Wear ear plugs
Management Strategies for Attention/Concentration

- Decrease Internal Distractions
  - Manage pain
  - Manage sleep
  - Avoid being overly hungry or thirsty
  - Get help or counseling if needed
A word or two about Sleep...

- Sleep deprivation can lead to many chronic health issues including (but not limited to)
  - Decreased immune system
  - Weight gain
  - Metabolic syndrome
  - Increased cancer risk
  - Grogginess is worse than being drunk as far as safety goes...

- Sleep management is important and referral to an expert is something to consider.
Management Strategies for Memory Problems

- Write it down.
  - Keep a notebook
  - Use an electronic notepad
  - Use post-it notes

- Use the calendar.
  - Electronic calendar
  - Use reminder alerts
  - Applications for phone/tablet
Management Strategies for Memory Problems

- Put items in the same place all the time.
- Plan a route and write it down.
- Keep important items in hand (don’t lay them down)—for example, in a cross body bag.
- There are internal memory strategies that can be learned.
Cognitive Therapy

Primary objectives:
1. Understand what is happening and what has changed from “before chemo”
2. Determine strategies which enable function
3. Develop exercises to deal with person-specific issues
How to Get Help

- Physician order:
  - “speech therapy evaluate and treat for cognitive changes status post chemotherapy”

- Be sure the referral goes to an SLP with experience in mild brain injury.