

# Short-Term Memory Loss and Cancer



The information in this factsheet will help you understand more about short-term memory loss and cancer. We hope it answers some of your questions about this symptom, what causes it, what are the signs and how it can be helped. If you have any other questions or concerns, please ask your doctor or call the **National Cancer Helpline** on **1800 200 700**.

### What is short-term memory loss?

Short-term memory loss is the loss of everyday information that has recently been learned. You may forget new facts, people's names, where things have been put, and what to do next.

**Remember that forgetfulness can be a normal part of everyday life and does not always mean you have short-term memory loss.**

Short-term memory loss is a problem that can happen due to cancer and its treatment. It can be a temporary or permanent problem that can affect your quality of life.

Difficulties with attention, concentration and planning are all factors that add to memory problems.

### What are the signs and symptoms to look out for?

The signs and symptoms of short-term memory loss include:

- Finding it difficult to remember things.
- Finding it difficult to concentrate.
- Finding it difficult to follow directions.
- Trouble learning new things.
- Difficulty doing things that you have previously done many times.
- Difficulty recognising familiar faces.
- Difficulty recalling details of conversations.
- Difficulty finding your way around a familiar place.

- Feeling agitated, with abrupt mood changes.
- Forgetting what happened in a day.
- Fever or chills, if you have an infection.
- A change in your behaviour.

It is important to contact your doctor or nurse if you or your family or friends notice any of the above symptoms. The cause of the memory loss should be found and treated where possible, as it may be due to side-effects of your medications, infection or your disease.

### What causes short-term memory loss?

The cause of memory loss is not clear but the following factors can increase your risk of developing memory problems.

1. Memory may be affected by a patient's age.
2. Memory may also be affected by treatments for cancer, such as surgery or radiotherapy to your brain.
3. It can be affected by chemotherapy and its side-effects.
4. The side-effects of hormone treatment and biological therapies can also affect memory. These can include fatigue and less resistance to infection.
5. Non-cancer medicines can also affect memory, for example, anti-sickness medicine.

If you have a brain tumour and are experiencing memory problems, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for confidential advice, information and support.

If you have a brain tumour and are experiencing memory problems, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for confidential advice, information and support.

Stress and anxiety caused by a cancer diagnosis can affect your ability to focus on tasks or activities.

### Conditions that can add to memory problems

There are many physical and emotional conditions that can add to memory problems. Memory problems may clear up once these conditions are treated by your doctor.

- **Stress and anxiety** caused by a cancer diagnosis can affect your ability to focus on tasks or activities.
- **Fatigue** can cause problems with memory and concentration.
- **Dehydration** can affect concentration.
- **Electrolyte disorders** can happen when there are high or low levels of calcium and/or sodium in your blood. This can cause confusion.
- **Anaemia** can affect concentration and memory. Anaemia is when you have a low blood haemoglobin. Haemoglobin is responsible for carrying oxygen around your bloodstream. If haemoglobin is low, oxygen is low and this can lead to difficulty concentrating and confusion.
- **Severe infection** in your bloodstream can affect your concentration.
- **Endocrine disorders** such as high or low blood sugar in diabetes and thyroid disorders can affect concentration and memory.

If fatigue is a problem for you, contact the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for a copy of the free booklet *Coping with Fatigue*.

### How long will the memory problem last?

Short-term memory problems can last for days, weeks, months or even years. During this time, they can affect your quality of life.

## Where can I go for help?

Your GP or hospital consultant can assess your symptoms and refer you to a clinical psychologist and occupational therapist (OT), if needed. These healthcare professionals are specially trained to help with short-term memory problems. Some hospitals may have rehabilitation clinics that you could be referred to, if needed.

Relaxation techniques and visualisation may also help. These techniques can be learned in cancer support centres throughout the country. For further information on these centres, please contact the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

If you are worried that you have problems with your memory, discuss it with your consultant at your next check-up.

## How can memory loss be helped?

The causes of short-term memory loss related to cancer and its treatment are still being studied. At this time there is no known way to prevent or treat it.

Training your brain may help with your memory problems. Exercises such as word and number games, brain teasers, jigsaws, basic maths and learning a musical instrument will get your brain moving. Spend an hour a day, 3 to 5 times a week, doing an exercise you like.

If you are still concerned about memory problems after 1 year, cognitive rehabilitation by a clinical psychologist and occupational therapist can also help.

Training your brain may help with your memory problems. Exercises such as word and number games, brain teasers, jigsaws, basic maths and learning a musical instrument will get your brain moving.

## Remembering names



Hints  
& tips

Names can be hard to recall especially when they are new to you. Here are some ideas to help you when you are trying to remember names.

- Ask a friend or family member what the person's name is.
- Repeat the new name a few times to yourself and try to visualise what the name and the person look like.
- Say the name back to the person when being introduced for the first time. For example, 'Hello John, I am pleased to meet you.'
- Write the name down.
- If you can't recall the name, go slowly through the alphabet to recall the first letter of the person's name.
- If you can't remember the person's name, don't be afraid to say to the person that you have difficulty remembering names.

## Strategies to help you remember everyday things at home

Being organised is important when trying to improve your quality of life due to memory loss. Here are a few tips to help you.

- Keep a notepad or diary with you at all times. Keep a note of everything that is important to you as well as a list of things you need to do each day.
- Keep a detailed wall planner with a calendar of events at all times.
- Keep a notepad by the phone to take messages.
- Set alarms on your watch or phone to remind you of important things.
- Label which cupboards or drawers are for which items.
- Display pictures of your family and friends.
- Use a weekly pill reminder box for medication that is refilled at the same time every week.
- Exercise your brain by reading or doing puzzles.
- Repeat important information to yourself.
- Use the timer on the cooker or microwave to remind yourself to switch them off.
- Use 'post-it' notes around the house to remind yourself of important information. For example, leave a note on the front door to remind yourself to lock it.
- When going out of the house, leave items that you need to take with you somewhere visible.

Being organised is important when trying to improve your quality of life due to memory loss.

## When talking or listening



Hints & tips

Sharing information can be difficult if you have problems with concentration and memory. Here are some ideas to help. If you feel overwhelmed with information:

- Ask people to repeat things.
- Ask people to slow down.
- Avoid distractions around you. Do ask the person to move to a quieter area.
- When speaking on the phone, do so in a quiet area.
- If you feel tired, avoid large group conversations

## How others can support you

1. Try to form a daily routine and stick to it. Make sure your family and friends are aware of this routine.
2. Take a family member or friend with you to all your doctor appointments. This will help you to remember information from your visit afterwards.
3. Do ask your family and friends for help. From time to time, you may need help with cooking and cleaning, etc.
4. Let your doctor or nurse know if you are taking new medications or changing your diet

## If you feel overwhelmed with information



It is quite common to feel overloaded with information. Here are some ideas that may help you if this happens.

- Be aware of when it occurs.
- Take regular breaks at regular intervals.
- Work or carry out tasks at your most alert time of day.
- Avoid clutter in your workspace and at home.
- Let people know when it is a bad time to distract you.
- Seek support when necessary.

### Emotional support

Many people can feel frustrated and anxious by short-term memory loss. This is a natural reaction. If you have been through a cancer diagnosis and suffer from memory problems, it can be very distressing.

It is important to remember that you are not alone and support is available. Do discuss your concerns with either a member of your family, a friend, doctor or nurse.

Survivors Supporting Survivors is a one-to-one support programme run by the Irish Cancer Society. It provides emotional and practical support to newly diagnosed patients. All of the volunteers have had a cancer diagnosis and have been carefully selected and trained to give you support, practical information and reassurance when you need it most. You can speak to someone who really knows what you are going through. If you would like to make contact with a volunteer, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

## For your partner, relative or friend when communicating



It can be hard to watch your partner, relative or friend experiencing difficulty with their memory. Here are some things you can do to help when you are communicating with them.

- Switch off the radio or television when sharing information.
- Ensure that you have the person's attention when sharing important information.
- Be patient and calm when sharing information.
- Maintain eye contact when interacting with each other.
- Keep information short and clear.
- Repeat information when necessary to help the person remember.
- Ask the person to repeat back information so that you know they have registered it.

## Useful organisations and websites

### Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland

Tel: 01 874 8136  
Email: [info@aoti.ie](mailto:info@aoti.ie)  
Website: [www.aoti.ie](http://www.aoti.ie)

### Psychological Society of Ireland

Tel: 01 472 0105  
Email: [info@psihq.ie](mailto:info@psihq.ie)  
Website: [www.psihq.ie](http://www.psihq.ie)



For more information on short-term memory loss or for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists, call the **National Cancer Helpline** on **Freefone**

# 1800 200 700

(Monday–Thursday, 9am–7pm, Friday 9am–5pm) or email [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie) for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialist.



Irish Cancer Society  
43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4

T: 01 231 0500  
F: 01 231 0555  
E: [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie)  
W: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)



Published by the Irish Cancer Society.  
© Irish Cancer Society 2010, revised 2013  
Next revision: 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Irish Cancer Society.