

# ‘Chemobrain’ the new enemy in cancer fight

Doctors turn attention to tackling patients’ cognitive issues after chemotherapy is over

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More than two years after Ms Chan Yoke completed chemotherapy treatment, some side effects still remain. In particular, the 49-year-old graphic designer finds it harder to focus now than before and becomes tired more easily.

“I don’t think I’m back to normal,” said Ms Chan, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in late 2014 and underwent treatment the following year.

“I used to be able to think very quickly. Now I’m slower and it can be difficult to concentrate on work.”

Doctors are beginning to focus on treating this phenomenon – known as “chemobrain” – which manifests as subtle yet noticeable changes found in people who have otherwise completely recovered from cancer treatment.

For years, the emphasis was on finding ways to help people survive cancer, said Associate Professor Alexandre Chan, who is studying the issue.

“Now, early-stage cancers are so treatable,” said Prof Chan, who is from the pharmacy department at the National University of Singapore’s science faculty.

“But because we catch them so early on and treat them so intensively, patients are exposed to a lot of these side effects.”

In a recent study of 131 breast cancer survivors, he and his team found that three in 10 people complained of cognitive issues up to a year after chemotherapy had ended.

These included taking longer to make decisions, deteriorating language skills, and not being able to multitask as well as before.

The team found that many patients also faced fatigue and insomnia. Participants were generally aged around 50.

“These people should be well,” said Prof Chan, who is also specialist pharmacist for oncology pharmacy at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS).

But their mental abilities still had not returned to what they were before chemotherapy started, he said.

Although Prof Chan’s study involved only people with breast cancer, he believes the results can be applied to other groups of cancer patients.

His team chose to focus on breast cancer because it has one of the highest survival rates, meaning that many patients will live to face the side effects of treatment.

Said Dr Raymond Ng, a senior consultant at the NCCS division of medical oncology: “(Chemobrain) can affect almost any patient receiving chemotherapy, and is not limited to a particular cancer type or age group.”

The good news is that most patients tend to get back to their normal lives and functions in the long run, he added.

Even so, NCCS is studying the problem in the hope of finding ways to prevent it from occurring, Dr Ng said.

Dr Khoo Kei Siong, a senior consultant in medical oncology from Parkway Cancer Centre, said there is a lot of variation in how long the effects of chemobrain may last.

“For some patients, it may be a few months. Others may still feel that they are not quite the same as before even years later,” he said.

Overseas research has shown that drugs are not particularly effective in treating chemobrain, although physical activity and brain-training exercises can help.

Said Dr Khoo: “I advise my patients to form habits that may help compensate for short-term memory loss and problems with recall.”

For example, people with this problem can start making use of reminder functions in smartphones or write down important information, he added.

Prof Chan hopes to learn if

younger patients face the same issues.

He also wants to help develop standardised programmes to identify and care for people with such problems.

“You really have to actively look out for these people,” he said. “You have to start early.”

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WIDEVARIATION

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Ms Chan Yoke (seated) with her mother Lina Toh, 74. Ms Chan, who completed chemotherapy two years ago, still finds it hard to focus and becomes tired easily. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN