The Road to Chemotherapy Recovery

by PAULA CLARK

Understanding Recovery After Chemotherapy

When I heard the news that I was in remission from leukemia, I could not have cared less. Don't get me wrong, I knew it was good news, but at the time all I could register was how bad I felt. After six weeks of brutal chemotherapy, I still had more than two years of treatment ahead of me (during a time when anti-nausea drugs like Zofran were unheard of).

Chemotherapy takes a toll on our immunity, energy and emotions, to name just a few. 30 years ago, the impact was not fully understood. Fortunately, cancer survivors' experiences have since been proven by research.

Recovery after chemotherapy may affect your life long after the cancer is gone. There are many late effects, but for this article I am going to focus on immunity, energy and emotional recovery after chemotherapy.

Immunity and Chemotherapy Recovery

When chemo wipes out cancer cells, it takes a lot of healthy cells with them. Many of these cells help fight off infection. It's well known that our immune systems are suppressed during chemo treatment. What you may not know is that immunosuppression also continues for up to 12 months post-treatment.

Childhood Cancer

The Childhood Cancer Survivor Study cohort showed childhood cancer survivors are more at risk of dying from an infection than the general population. They're also more likely to acquire an infection and have higher rates of complications from infection than their siblings. According to Heo (2020) this may be caused by "profound deficiencies in lymphocyte function".

Smoking and Chemotherapy

Verma (2016) also found that treatment regimen and incidence of smoking affect how breast cancer patients' immune systems recovered after chemo. Overall, their immunity was lessened at least nine months post-treatment.

Infection

That's why taking the steps to prevent infection is crucial for cancer survivors to stay safe. Reduce your exposure to infection as best you can by washing your hands and avoiding touching your face during flu season. Another study also suggests getting revaccinated post-treatment.

Meditation

Finally, you may want to sign up for a meditation class. Research has shown that training newly diagnosed patients in relaxation techniques, like deep breathing, can help improve their immunity during treatment. It may be worth a try after treatment as well.

Energy and Chemotherapy Recovery

“Fatigue is one of the most common complaints during the first year after treatment,” says the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. It’s also one of the most misunderstood.

Cancer survivors feeling fatigued often say they feel “tired”, but tiredness can be remedied with rest. Fatigue does not go away with rest. The folks at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute have some suggestions for managing fatigue. Ask your doctor or nurse if any of these could be contributing to your fatigue:

- Medications
- Other medical problems
- Exercising too intensely or too much
- Diet

They may also suggest:

- Safe exercise programs
- Relaxation skills training
- Changing your diet or drinking more fluids
- Nutritional supplements
- Referrals to specialists like physiotherapists or occupational therapists

How to Preserve Your Energy

Plan your day accordingly. Pay attention to your energy levels and save energy by adjusting your approach to daily tasks, like sitting on a stool while washing dishes. There’s no shame in taking a rest or nap in between activities to recover your energy.
Maintain good sleeping habits. While resting and listening to your body is important, this also means having a good sleep routine. Practice good sleep hygiene by going to bed and waking at the same time every day.
Do things that bring you joy. When it comes to the day-to-day tasks, focus on interests you enjoy that give you energy, but do not zap your energy by overdoing it. If you like to read, listen to audiobooks or read along to them.
Ask for help. Be specific about what you need, like picking up some groceries or cooking a meal. Adjust your priorities if you need to. If having a spotless house was part of your identity before cancer, you may need to think about what is truly important to you now.
Find support. Finding support from other cancer survivors who will validate you and understand you is essential. There are many online groups if going out is too taxing.

It’s important to note that fatigue was often dismissed as depression rather than a late effect from chemotherapy. If you run into that attitude, find another doctor or send them the link from a trusted source like the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

Emotions and Chemotherapy Recovery

A cancer diagnosis is a life or death situation, and naturally, it brings up strong and painful emotions. Emotional and social support is crucial during and after treatment to help survivors process intense and difficult, yet completely understandable feelings. If the emotions become too overwhelming, it may be time to seek out support. Whether it is a support group or a health professional, coping with the psychological stress that comes from overwhelming emotional pain is necessary to prevent issues like depression and PTSD. It’s important to know which strategies work.

One study showed that laughter may still be the best medicine. It found laughter therapy helped improve breast

cancer survivor’s quality of life and resilience. If more serious symptoms like extreme anxiety or flashbacks have set in, find a health professional like a social worker or psychologist trained in those areas. Look for professionals who can provide cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for anxiety and depression. For symptoms of PTSD like nightmares, flashbacks, feeling numb or feeling angry all the time, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) are helpful. Talking to your doctor about medications to use with psychotherapy can also help.

Other Effects and Resources

Recovery after chemotherapy takes time, and some of the effects may be with you long after treatment is done. Your immunity, energy levels and emotional health are just three among the many late effects of chemotherapy. You may also find you have “chemo brain” or physical problems with internal organs.

You can learn more about managing cognitive changes from the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and for a comprehensive resource on late effects from cancer treatment, check out Livestrong.

The most important thing you can do post-treatment is listen to your body and respect what it is telling you. Don’t feel pressured to “be grateful to be alive” when you know your quality of life could be better. You deserve to feel as well as you possibly can.