Memory Impairment Common in People with a History of Cancer

AACR

• Large study shows cancer patients have significant memory problems.
• Impairment may be linked to biology, treatments and biological predisposition.
• Strategies to diagnose and treat memory impairments are needed.

MIAMI — People with a history of cancer have a 40 percent greater likelihood of experiencing memory problems that interfere with daily functioning, compared with those who have not had cancer, according to results of a new, large study.

The findings, believed to be one of the first culled from a nationwide sample of people diagnosed with different cancers, mirror findings of cancer-related memory impairment in smaller studies of certain cancers, such as breast and prostate cancer. Results were presented at the Third AACR Conference on The Science of Cancer Health Disparities [1].

“The findings show that memory impairment in cancer patients is a national problem that we must pay special attention to,” said Pascal Jean-Pierre, Ph.D., M.P.H., assistant professor at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, department of pediatrics, and the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

He added that while there is no curative treatment yet for memory impairment — ongoing studies are testing therapies — physicians can still help these patients.

“One of the most important parts of cancer treatment is management of symptoms, such as impairments in attention, memory and fatigue, in order to improve a patient’s quality of life. This study suggests these memory issues are more common than had been recognized before, and should be assessed in all patients with a history of cancer,” Jean-Pierre said.

Jean-Pierre and colleagues used data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), a population-based survey sponsored by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention designed to collect information on the health and nutrition in U.S. households. Their sample included 9,819 people, aged 40 years and older, from diverse educational and racial-ethnic backgrounds. Within that group, 1,305 participants reported they had cancer or a history of cancer.

All participants had a physical exam and responded to a survey, which included the question: “Are you limited in any way because of difficulty remembering or because you experience periods of confusion?”

Fourteen percent of participants who had cancer reported memory impairment compared to 8 percent of participants who did not have cancer. Those with cancer

were 40 percent more likely to have memory issues than other participants — impairments that interfered with daily functioning.

“The findings indicate that cancer is, therefore, a key independent predictor of memory problems in the sample studied,” said Jean-Pierre.

He calls the condition “cancer related cognitive dysfunction,” suggesting that it goes beyond the “chemobrain” label that has been attached primarily to women treated with chemotherapy for their breast cancer who reported problems in cognitive function (e.g., attention and memory).

“These memory issues can be related to treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiation, and hormone therapies, or to the tumor biology itself, which could change brain chemistry and neurobehavioral function,” said Jean-Pierre.

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