

Section Six: Managing symptoms of a brain tumour

Tekiona Ono

Te whakahaere tohumate
puku roro



Key points:

- Brain tumours affect the tissue in and around the brain and causes symptoms like nausea, headaches, and seizures.
- Brain tumours can change the way you think and your memory, mood, and personality.
- Talk to your doctor or nurse about any symptoms you may be experiencing. As well as providing cancer treatments, your doctor may be able to refer you to other services to help you manage your cancer symptoms.

Ngā kōrero matua:

- Papā ai te puku roro ki te kiko kei roto i te roro, e karapoti ana hoki i te roro me tana whakaputa tohumate pērā ki te hiaruaki, ānini māhunga, me ngā rehu ohotata.
- Ka rerekē katoa ō whakaaro, tō pūmahara, tō kaingākau, tō tuakiri nā te puku roro.
- Kōrero ki tō rata, ki tō tapuhi rānei mō ngā tohumate tērā pea kei te rongo koe. I tua atu i tana kaha ki te hoatu maimoatanga matepukupuku, tērā pea ka āhei tō rata ki te tuku i a koe ki ētahi atu ratonga ki te āwhina i a koe ki te whakahaere i ō tohumate matepukupuku.

Ways of managing symptoms of a brain tumour

Talk to your doctor or nurse about any symptoms you may be experiencing. As well as cancer treatments, your doctor may be able to refer you to a palliative care service to help you manage the symptoms.

Fatigue (no energy)

Fatigue can be described in many ways, including feeling exhausted, extremely tired, sleepy, or drowsy, or finding it difficult to concentrate. Fatigue can appear suddenly and rest may not help. Here are some ideas to help you cope with fatigue.

- Let people help you. Whānau, friends and neighbours may offer to help with tasks such as meals, shopping, childcare, housework, and driving.
- Take a few weeks off work during or after treatment or work fewer hours. You may be able to work from home.
- Do light exercise, such as walking, and keep up your normal exercise routine if approved by your doctor. Do not start any new exercise routine until you feel better after treatment (see page 44 for more information on exercise)
- Try to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. Some people find small, frequent snacks more appealing than meals.
- Fatigue may be caused by specific things that can be found in blood tests and may be improved by treatment.

Nausea (feeling sick)

If you have a brain tumour you may feel sick at some point. This can be caused by many things, including the cancer itself and cancer treatments.

People have found the following suggestions helpful.

- Try to eat small amounts (snacks) often.
- Have your meals when you feel like eating.
- Avoid fatty or fried foods.
- Rest before and after eating.
- Do not lie flat during or after eating.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- See a dietitian or nurse for dietary advice.
- Try relaxation or mindfulness exercises.
- Do something enjoyable as a distraction from feeling sick.

Anti-sickness medications work in different ways, depending on the cause of your nausea. Let your doctor know if you feel sick or if the medication you are using is not working – there may be something else you can try.



You can find more information on nausea on our website:
cancer.org.nz/eating-well-with-cancer

Headaches

Not everyone with a brain tumour has headaches. If you do have headaches, you may not be in pain all the time and they can usually be well managed.

There is a range of prescription medications and complementary therapies, such as relaxation techniques, that can help with headaches due to a brain tumour.

You may have a headache due to raised pressure in your brain caused by the tumour or treatment. This is often treated with steroids. For more information on steroids, see page 28.

Pain-relief medications work best when taken regularly. Tell your treatment team if your prescribed medications are not easing your headaches, as there are likely to be other pain-relieving medications you can try.

Seizures

Seizures, also called fits or convulsions, are caused by abnormal electrical activity in the brain.

If a person with a brain tumour has not had seizures at the time of diagnosis, there is only a small chance that they will develop seizures later on.

There are two main types of seizure - focal seizures and generalised seizures.

Focal seizures

These are also called partial seizures and affect one part of the body, such as an arm or a leg. The symptoms depend on which part of the brain is affected. They include twitching, jerking, tingling, and/or numbness. You may go 'blank' and stop responding to people around you for seconds or minutes. You might notice odd smells or sensations or experience a feeling of déjà vu.

Partial seizures may cause mood changes and memory loss just before, during, or after the seizures. People often feel extremely tired after a focal seizure.

Generalised seizures

These seizures usually affect the whole body and are known as tonic-clonic seizures.

You might lose consciousness or stop responding to people around you for a few minutes. Your muscles may become tighter, and your arms and legs can make jerky or twitching movements. Your breathing may be shallow, and you may lose bladder and/or bowel control.

If you have a seizure, talk to your treatment team about ways to manage it. Many seizures can be managed with anti-seizure medications, which are also called anti-epileptic medication or anticonvulsants. If you continue to have seizures while you are on prescribed medication, speak to your treatment team for advice.

Ways to help someone who is having a seizure

If you are with someone who is having a seizure, the following tips may be helpful.

- Stay calm and reassure the person.
- Move any hazards away and lower the person to the floor if you can.
- Put something soft under their head.
- Do not try to restrain them or put anything in their mouth.
- Stay with them until the seizure is over.

Call 111 for an ambulance if:

- this is the person's first seizure
- they are injured
- they had food or fluid in their mouth during the seizure
- the seizure lasts longer than a few minutes or they have one seizure after another
- you are unsure what to do.

Trouble sleeping

Some people with brain tumours have trouble sleeping or have difficulties falling asleep, which can affect how well they feel during the day. If you are taking steroid medication or have headaches or nausea, this may also affect your sleep.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, these things may help.

- Try to wake up at the same time each day and go to bed at the same time each night.
- Create a quiet, dark, and restful place for sleeping.
- Reduce caffeinated drinks like tea, coffee, and soft drinks, and alcohol. These may give you energy but leave you unable to sleep.
- Use your pain medication as prescribed if a headache is keeping you awake.
- Take any steroid medication at the time prescribed (usually early in the day).



You can find more information in our information sheet If you have difficulty sleeping on our website: cancer.org.nz/sleep-problems

Changes in your thinking, memory, mood, or personality

You, or those close to you, may notice changes in your memory or your personality. Some people describe feeling very emotional or upset, while others find it hard to think clearly, concentrate, or remember things. Sometimes people behave in ways that seem out of character. These changes do not happen for everyone. You may find having a daily routine with plenty of rest helps you feel better.

With support, you can learn ways to manage the changes. Many people feel better with time.

If you have memory problems, these things may help.

- Try using a diary or online calendar to record appointments.
- Ask your chemist about a medication organiser to help you remember when to take your medication.

Sometimes changes in how you think and in your memory, mood, or personality can create ongoing problems. Your specialist may recommend an assessment by a health professional, such as a neuropsychologist, who can help with ways to manage these changes.



You can find more information on managing change on Brain Injury New Zealand's website: www.brain-injury.nz

Weight gain

Some people with brain tumours put on weight due to steroid medication, which can cause increased appetite and fluid retention.

During treatment you may be less active than usual and gain some weight as a result.

A small increase in weight is not usually a problem, but a large weight gain can affect your general health. Weight gain can also affect how you feel about yourself and your confidence and energy levels.

Talk to your treatment team about safe ways to lose weight. Avoid diets or medications promising rapid weight loss. You are more likely to keep weight off if you lose it slowly and steadily.



You can find more information about managing weight on our website: cancer.org.nz/managing-your-weight