THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
MD Anderson Cancer Center
Making Cancer History®

Jeffrey S. Wefel, Ph.D., ABPP
Professor and Chief
Section of Neuropsychology
Department of Neuro-Oncology
E-mail: jwefel@mdanderson.org

Best Practice Guidance to Assist with Neurocognitive Test Completion

- Cognitive problems are widely accepted as possible consequences of brain tumors and brain directed therapies.
- The National Brain Tumor Society (NBTS) Jumpstarting Brain Tumor Drug Development survey reported that "retaining brain function" was one of the top 3 priorities for brain tumor patients (NBTS, 2015).
- Neurocognitive testing is the gold standard for measuring neurocognitive function.
- The neurocognitive clinical trial battery (CTB) used in RTOG/NRG Oncology cooperative group studies is brief, easy to administer, and sensitive to neurocognitive impairment and changes in function.
- When administering these tests, one may notice that some patients may experience neurocognitive dysfunction during the course of the study. It is very important to complete testing even if the patient is having more difficulty with the tests so that we can understand the impact of their illness and treatments on neurocognitive function. The Neurocognitive Test Administration Manual/Appendix provides you with training on how to work with patients to complete testing even when their functioning declines.
- Missing neurocognitive test results directly reduces our ability to conduct statistical analyses and answer the clinical trial questions. This risks wasting the time and efforts of the patients, families, and trial site staff such as yourself.
- If the tests cannot be administered, please document the reason why the tests could not be administered. The Neurocognitive Test Administration Manual/Appendix provides you with training on how to select the appropriate reason code. If you are not sure of the appropriate reason code, contact the neurocognitive chair.
  - For example, use the code "Patient Refusal" when a patient refuses to come to the testing appointment in order to avoid participating in testing or when they state they are unwilling to attempt a test. Do not use the "Patient Refusal" code if they miss testing due to scheduling errors, illness, or another reason that does not reflect their explicit unwillingness to participate in testing. Similarly, if they are unable to complete testing because their neurologic deficits prevent them from doing so, then use the reason code "Neurological Disability".
- Thanks to the dedicated efforts of NRG/RTOG sites and patients and families participating in neurocognitive testing on our trials, we have enhanced the lives of cancer patients by improving the standard of care and reducing neurocognitive impairments in our cancer survivors.

Establishing Rapport and Providing Feedback to the Patient

- The certified test administrator should be thoroughly familiar with the tests prior to their administration so that he/she can attend to establishing a comfortable working relationship with the patient.
- Please introduce yourself to the patient. Take a few minutes to establish rapport and allow the patient to get comfortably seated in the office. You may introduce the neurocognitive testing by saying, "Today we will be doing several tasks to look at your thinking skills. I will ask you to complete several paper and pencil assessments. Some may seem more challenging than others. I just want you to do that best you can."
- Additionally, answer questions the patient may have about testing. Patients may ask:
  - "What will I be doing today? How long will it take?": You may provide a general response such as, "We will spend about 30 minutes going through several measures that will help us to understand your neurocognitive function."
  - "How did I do?": You may respond with encouraging statements such as, "You worked very hard today. Thank you," or "These can be challenging tests – thank you for giving your full effort." Every effort should be made to treat the patient with courtesy and dignity.
  - Do not try to provide specific information about patient performance, such as, "You answered 10 out of 12 correctly," or "You did better/worse than last time."
- It is important to understand that some patients will be anxious (as they are about many other medical procedures). Offering encouraging statements about their effort ("You are working very hard on these tests; thank you for that."), and not their performance, can help put them at ease.