

# HAVING CHEMOTHERAPY

## ONCOLOGY DAY UNIT Patient Information Leaflet



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# CHEMOTHERAPY INFORMATION

## **What is chemotherapy?**

Chemotherapy means treatment with anti-cancer drugs. These are called cytotoxic drugs (cyto = cell, toxic = poison). Several different drugs may be given together (a protocol or regime) and this is then repeated every few weeks. Your doctor or nurse will tell you about the drugs used to treat you and how often. You may be given a further information sheet about the protocol with which you are being treated.

## **How does chemotherapy work?**

The drugs enter your blood stream and reach all parts of your body. They destroy cancer cells by damaging them so they cannot divide and grow. The drugs can also affect normal cells that are growing and dividing rapidly and this may cause side effects. These are usually temporary because healthy cells grow back to normal quickly.

## **How is chemotherapy given?**

Chemotherapy is given according to a protocol and how often you have treatment will depend on the plan. Usually you will have one cycle of treatment followed by a rest period before the next cycle. This allows your body to recover from any unwanted effects of the chemotherapy. Often your body may need longer to recover so the rest period may be extended. This is not unusual so do not worry.

The number of cycles varies according to the plan. Your chemotherapy will be given on the Day Unit.

Chemotherapy can often be given by mouth.

Frequently it must be given by injection into a vein, using a syringe, an infusion (drip) or a small pump.

Some chemotherapy is given by injection under the skin or into a muscle in the arm or buttock.

In a few cases, chemotherapy must be injected into the spinal fluid. (Intrathecal therapy). You will be given an information sheet if this applies to you. Your chemotherapy will be given on the Oncology day unit. You may be asked to take some chemotherapy tablets while at home.

### **What are the side effects?**

The side effects depend on the type of chemotherapy. With some types there are very few, if any, side effects.

With other types, side effects are common. Also different people react differently.

There are some side effects which are common to many types of chemotherapy (described below). Other side effects are peculiar to certain types of chemotherapy - your doctor and nurse will explain these to you and you may be given an information sheet for the type of treatment you are having.

## **Side effects affecting the blood and bone marrow**

The bone marrow makes all the blood cells but it is poisoned by many types of chemotherapy. This causes the levels of normal blood cells to fall. You will have regular blood tests to check this while you are having treatment.

You may become short of red blood cells that carry oxygen round the body (anaemia). This can make you feel tired and breathless. You may need to have blood transfusions while having chemotherapy. This is a very safe procedure but if you have any concerns, do talk to your doctor or nurse.

You may become short of white blood cells. These help the body to fight infection so you may be at risk of developing serious infections while having chemotherapy.

Most of the infections come from within your own body but it is sensible to avoid contact with other people who have infections such as a bad cold, flu, shingles or chickenpox.

Your nurse will explain how to monitor your temperature and report any signs of infection to the oncology day unit or the haematology ward or your hospital doctor.

It is possible that you may need to come into hospital for antibiotics to treat infection while you are having chemotherapy.

You may become short of platelets. These help make the blood clot. If they are low, you may bruise more easily or bleed.

Let your doctor or nurse know if you are already taking tablets to thin the blood. For example Aspirin, Warfarin, Sinthron.

To minimise the risk of bleeding and bruising, use a soft toothbrush and electric razor, be careful not to cut yourself on knives or when gardening. Avoid playing contact sports.

You should inform your hospital doctor or nurse straight away if you have signs of bleeding. It is possible that you may need to have transfusions of platelets while you are having chemotherapy.

### **Sickness and vomiting**

Many, but not all, types of chemotherapy can cause nausea (feeling sick) and sometimes vomiting. This usually lasts for a short time while you are having chemotherapy and sometimes for a few days afterwards. There are very effective anti-sickness drugs now and you will be given them regularly during your treatment and sometimes for a few days afterwards.

If you are taking anti-sickness tablets at home, it is a good idea to take them regularly. If you still have sickness or vomiting, tell your doctor or nurse as there may be alternative anti-sickness medication that you can have.

## **Eating and drinking**

Chemotherapy may alter your sense of taste. You may notice a metallic taste in your mouth or everything may taste very bland.

You may not feel like eating or drinking with these side effects. However you should try to drink plenty of fluids.

Try sipping cold, clear fluids slowly. Fizzy drinks like soda water or ginger ale may help.

Small, frequent meals or snacks may be easier to eat than large meals.

Foods with sharp or strong flavours keep their normal taste better.

It is not unusual to lose weight while you are having chemotherapy.

Some types of food can carry infection so it is important to follow the diet advice sheet for patients who are having chemotherapy. Your nurse will give you this.

You may drink a small amount of alcohol if you feel like it but alcohol can sometimes make nausea worse. There are some chemotherapy regimes where you should not drink alcohol. Your doctor will tell you if you are on one of these.

Diarrhoea or constipation may also occur for a few days with some drugs. If either last longer than a few days, tell your doctor or nurse who can advise you on what medication to take.

## **Fatigue**

It is normal to feel more tired after chemotherapy.

Try to plan your day so that you can have rest periods between activities. Save your energy for the things that you want to do.

Gentle regular exercise, such as walking, actually helps to improve fatigue.

If you get tired easily, limit your activities and only do the things that are important to you.

## **Skin**

Some drugs can cause damage if they leak out of the vein. If you feel any burning or pain when receiving chemotherapy, tell the nurse straight away. If your hand or arm is sore following the injection, contact the oncology day unit.

Certain drugs can cause skin discolouration or dark lines along the veins.

Your skin can become very dry and cracked. Using a good cream such as E45 may help prevent this. Your skin can become very sensitive to sunlight during and after chemotherapy so take extra care in strong sunlight. Use high factor sun block, cover up and stay in the shade as much as possible.

## **Hair care**

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause you to lose some or all of your hair. This is always temporary and your hair will grow again when treatment finishes.

Wigs can be obtained in advance if you are likely to lose your hair. These are available on the NHS.

Chemotherapy can make your hair very dry and brittle. Use a gentle shampoo and conditioner. Try to wash your hair less often. Use a wide toothed comb to avoid pulling on your hair. Avoid hair dyes, perms and excessive heat from heated rollers and hair dryers.

## **Sexuality and fertility**

Chemotherapy may affect sexual function in various ways. Loss of sex drive is not uncommon in both men and women.

Chemotherapy itself does not usually affect sexual performance or cause impotence but the stress of the treatment may make you feel more tired than usual.

Feel free to discuss any concerns that you may have with your doctor or nurse. Even if they are unable to help you, they can refer you to someone who can.

## **For women**

It is possible to become pregnant while you are having treatment.

Many of the chemotherapy drugs can cause serious (and possibly fatal) damage to the unborn baby so **it is vital that you tell your doctor or nurse if you think you might be pregnant before you start treatment.**

**You must also use a reliable form of barrier contraception during intercourse while you are having chemotherapy.**

During treatment and for about a year afterwards, eggs may not be formed normally, if they are produced at all. You should use an effective barrier method of contraception during this time as well.

Women having certain chemotherapy may notice changes in their menstrual cycle. Periods may become irregular or stop during the treatment.

Some chemotherapy can cause infertility that may be temporary or permanent depending on your age or treatment. Please discuss this with your doctor.

**For men**

Some chemotherapy treatments cause sterility (no sperm production), which may be permanent.

Your doctor will tell you if this is a possibility in which case you will be offered the opportunity to bank sperm before starting treatment.

During treatment and for about a year afterwards, it isn't advisable to father a child as the sperm may not be formed normally.

You should use an effective barrier method of contraception during, and for a year after, treatment.

**Other effects**

Other side effects can occur so please contact the hospital for advice or discuss with your nurse if you notice anything that concerns you or if you feel is unusual for you.

## **How will I feel during my chemotherapy?**

Having chemotherapy and its effect on your life, can cause a range of feelings.

Fear, anxiety and depression are common to many people with cancer. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you feel anxious or depressed. They can advise you on ways to help.

Loss of concentration may be a side effect of chemotherapy. This can affect your ability to listen and remember things. Don't feel embarrassed to ask for information to be repeated as often as you need it.

Some people find it helps to gather information about their disease and treatment because this lessens fear of the unknown. Find out as much as you want to know and do not be afraid to ask questions.

Talking to a friend, relative or another patient may be helpful. National organisations such as Macmillan Cancerbacup can supply a lot of information and support. Your nurse can give you contact details.

The information officer in the Macmillan Windmill Unit can also give you details of national organizations and internet sites.

Many people do not understand about cancer and may avoid you because they're not sure what to say or how to help. If you can talk to others about your illness, treatment, needs and feelings, people are often willing to give you help and support.

Remember everyone needs some support during difficult times. You should not hesitate to ask for help from your doctor or nurse during or after your treatment.



## Useful contact details

Hospital Switchboard: **01253 300000**

### Patient Relations Department

The Patient Relations Department offer impartial advice and deal with any concerns or complaints the Trust receives. You can contact them via:

Tel: **01253 955589**

email: **patient.relations@bfwh.nhs.uk**

You can also write to us at:

**Patient Relations Department, Blackpool Victoria Hospital,  
Whinney Heys Road, Blackpool FY3 8NR**

Further information is available on our website: **www.bfwh.nhs.uk**

### References

This leaflet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this leaflet are available on request from: **Procedural Document and Leaflet Coordinator 01253 953397**

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