

Pre-chemotherapy education – ambulatory

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is a treatment using anti-cancer drugs to damage cancer cells, so they can no longer divide or grow.

It works by entering your bloodstream either by:

- a tablet or capsule taken by mouth
- subcutaneous injection into the fatty tissue of your skin
- a drip into your vein; or
- a needle into your spine

Your treating team will discuss with you the appropriate chemotherapy drug and form of delivery specific for your treatment.

Chemotherapy side effects

Throughout treatment, you may experience some side effects. Not everyone experiences all of them, but they may include:

- Fever and an increased risk of infection
- Nausea – the sick feeling in your stomach; or vomiting – bringing up your food
- Loose stools numerous times per day – known as diarrhoea; or stools that are hard to pass – known as constipation
- Not feeling hungry or losing your appetite
- Temporary loss of hair
- Feeling more tired and worn out than usual
- Mouth sores
- Loss of sensation in your feet or hands
- Forgetfulness or difficulty remembering things

These symptoms may worsen as your treatment cycle goes on, but should improve once it is completed. Talk to your treating team about your experiences, as they can provide suggestions for relief.

Blood counts and testing

Treatment can cause changes in your blood count, which is why it is important you have regular blood tests as arranged by your treating team.

Red blood cells carry oxygen around your body. You might feel tired, cold or short of breath when these levels are low.

White blood cells help fight infection. These include neutrophils, which can become low during treatment and means your body can't fight infection as well as usual.

Platelets help form clots to control bleeding and bruising. During treatment these also become lower than usual so extra care must be taken to prevent bleeding.

You may at some point require a red blood cell or a platelet transfusion to top up your blood count levels, but your treating team will let you know if and when this is required.

How to look after yourself during treatment

During and after treatment, there are extra things you will need to do to take care of yourself.

- Check your temperature as often as advised by your treating team, and anytime you are feeling unwell. Seek medical advice immediately if it is over 38C.
- Take anti-nausea medication as prescribed, as it can help prevent the onset of nausea before you experience it.
- Shower daily with a mild soap to prevent bacteria on the skin and use a gentle moisturiser to prevent dryness or cracks on the skin.
- Brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush twice per day, use a gentle salt-water mouthwash, and notify your treating team if red or white areas develop– these are known as mouth sores.
- As your platelets may be low, extra care should be taken to avoid bleeding. Use an electric razor for shaving, be gentle when blowing your nose, and avoid contact sports.
- If you have a central line (also known as a PICC or Hickman line), examine the skin daily to check for redness, swelling or tenderness around the site. Keep the dressing dry at all times, and if it becomes wet or peeling away call your treating ward to arrange a dressing change. Also check that the caps remain on each lumen.
- If you are attending hospital for treatment - bring a book or something to keep you entertained.
- If you have a central line, wear a button up shirt so the nurse can access it easily.

How to keep safe when you're out and about

There are extra things you can do to stay healthy and safe when out and about.

- Try to keep active with 30-60 minutes of light exercise per day, such as walking.
- You will be more tired than usual so do also make time to get enough rest.
- Notify your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping or unable to get out of bed.
- Some medication can make your skin extra sensitive to sun, so avoid direct sunlight and wear sunscreen and a hat when outdoors.
- Maintain safe social distancing, or wear a surgical mask when avoiding crowds is not possible
- Be considerate of what you are breathing in. Avoid tobacco smoke and dusty construction sites, as these can increase your exposure to respiratory infections.

Practicing good hand hygiene can dramatically reduce germs. Wash your hands or use hand sanitiser:

- After using the toilet
- Before and after meal preparation, eating or taking medication
- After sneezing, coughing or nose blowing
- After touching objects, pets, or other people

As you will be more susceptible to infection, some activities should be avoided.

- Stay away from others while they are unwell
- Don't let pets lick your face or scratch you; keep them clean; and have someone else clean up their droppings; and
- Avoid gardening as there is a lot of bacteria in soil.

Finally, talk to your specialist about what vaccines you need, such as the flu vaccine, which can provide you with extra protection.

Diet and nutrition

Although you may experience a decreased appetite and changes to your taste and smell, it is important to choose foods that will help in regaining strength.

You also need to stay hydrated with at least 2 litres of caffeine-free fluids per day, unless your doctor has restricted your fluid intake.

Small meals regularly or eating plain foods is better than having nothing at all.

During treatment and while your immune system is compromised, additional food safety measures should be taken to reduce your risk of infection.

A low-bacteria diet should be followed by avoiding the following:

- Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, seafood or eggs (including runny yolks)
- Sandwich, cured or highly processed meats including those from the deli
- Unpasteurised dairy products
- Soft cheeses, and anything with mould in it
- Food past its 'best before' date

It's essential to avoid contamination by safely preparing foods.

Be sure to:

- Wash your hands, surfaces and equipment thoroughly, especially after preparing raw meat
- Wash and peel raw fruit and vegetables as bacteria can live on the skin
- Thaw frozen foods in the fridge overnight, rather than at room temperature or the microwave; then cook until steaming hot
- Don't defrost and re-freeze food more than once
- Cook meat until 'well done'
- Only eat food that has been freshly cooked and served immediately
- Use leftovers within 1-2 days

Personal relationships and fertility

Cancer treatment can cause changes to your physical appearance, fatigue and hormonal changes, which may affect your sexual drive. Touch, cuddling and gentle massage are ways to connect and maintain intimacy without having intercourse.

Treatment can also affect your fertility, sexual function or a developing baby, which is important to discuss with your doctor before treatment commences. After treatment, it is important not to assume you are infertile without your doctor arranging for this to be medically verified.

It is safe to resume intercourse once your white cells are above 1.0 and your platelet count above 50,

However condoms are recommended during treatment to protect you from:

- sexually transmitted infections
- pregnancy while there is risk to a developing baby
- and to protect your partner from exposure to bodily fluids that are potentially cytotoxic.

Some women may experience vaginal dryness, for which lubricants such as KY jelly can be used; while men may experience erectile dysfunction. Notify your treating team if these symptoms are ongoing.

Chemotherapy safety in the home

Chemotherapy medication is cytotoxic. For 7 days after treatment, your bodily fluids (which include sweat, vomit, urine and faeces) can contain traces of chemotherapy, and exposure can be damaging to people who don't have cancer.

It is important to follow safety guidelines for 7 days after each treatment of chemotherapy, to avoid exposing others.

- Put the lid down when flushing the toilet to avoid splashing, and flush twice.
- Clothing or linen soiled in bodily fluids should be washed separately on a maximum cycle. Everything else can be safely combined with another person's load.
- If you spill chemotherapy medication or any bodily fluids – put on gloves and clean by soaking it up with paper towel, cleaning the area with warm soapy water and a disposable cloth, then rinsing with water.
- Double-bag any rubbish that comes into contact with chemotherapy or bodily fluids.
- If you can't swallow your chemotherapy tablets whole – speak to your pharmacist or doctor. They must not be crushed, chewed or cut.
- Store chemotherapy medications as directed by your doctor or pharmacist – do not keep them in a pill organiser and make sure they are kept out of reach of children.
- Return any unused medication to the pharmacy for correct disposal.
- Pregnant family members and friends can still visit, but should take extra care to avoid contact with any cytotoxic bodily fluids.

When to seek help

There are some symptoms that you should seek help urgently for, by attending the emergency department immediately. These include:

- Temperature of 38C or higher
- Chills, sweats, shivers or shakes
- Breathing difficulties
- Uncontrolled diarrhoea
- If you're unable to keep any food or drink down; or
- Pain that you can't get under control with your prescribed medication

Some further symptoms should be reported to your treating team as soon as possible, which include:

- Headache or stiff neck
- Sore throat, cough or cold
- Mouth sores
- Rash or redness of the skin
- Swelling, redness or tenderness, especially around a wound, catheter site or rectal area
- Pain or blood when passing urine

Your health service may advise you to contact your nurse coordinator, treating ward or doctor for guidance on managing these symptoms.