



Being prepared and understanding chemotherapy can help lessen some of the stress surrounding your treatment. Ask your oncologist, doctor or nurse any questions you have about the risks and benefits of chemotherapy.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. In combination chemotherapy a number of drugs may be given at the same time. Sometimes only one drug is used. Chemotherapy may be used before or after surgery or radiation therapy, or together with radiation therapy.

How is chemotherapy given?

Treatment may be given:

- orally
- through a needle inserted into a vein, slowly injecting the medication
- through a catheter (a special tube), placed in a large vein, usually in the neck or chest which remains there throughout the course of the treatment, or
- by introducing drugs directly into an organ or tissue affected by cancer.

Is chemotherapy painful?

Chemotherapy should cause no discomfort, but some medications may cause a burning sensation in the veins. If at any time a chemotherapy injection hurts or burns, immediately tell the nurse who is giving you the drug. If after your treatment you notice some tenderness develop over the injection site, contact the chemotherapy unit immediately.

Why is chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy may be used:

- to cure cancer. With some types of cancer, chemotherapy will destroy all the cancer cells and cure the disease
- to reduce the chance of the cancer coming back. Chemotherapy may be given after surgery or radiation therapy to destroy any remaining cancer cells that are too small to see
- to shrink a cancer prior to surgery or radiation therapy, to increase the success of your primary treatment
- to shrink a cancer, to improve symptoms and to prolong life in cases where cure is not possible.

How often and how long is chemotherapy?

Some forms of chemotherapy are given for a few days, weeks, months and some on a long-term basis. It depends on the type of cancer you have, the way it responds to treatment and your ability to tolerate the treatment. Your doctor will talk to you about the time period planned for your course of treatment.

Where is treatment given?

Chemotherapy can be given to you as an outpatient in a chemotherapy clinic or in a doctor's office. Sometimes a short stay in hospital is necessary if it is a longer or more complex chemotherapy treatment.

What are the possible side-effects?

Chemotherapy can produce side-effects in some but not all people. Different chemotherapy drugs cause different side-effects. Most are often temporary and can be treated or managed. Possible side-effects include:

- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea or constipation (often due to anti-nausea medication)
- fatigue (tiredness)
- mouth sores or ulcers
- increased risk of infection
- increased risk of bruising
- hair loss
- muscle weakness
- skin sensitivity to sunlight (specific drugs only)
- dry or tired eyes
- loss of appetite.

Having any of the above side-effects is not related to whether the chemotherapy is working or not.

Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.

Where can I get reliable information?

Cancer Council 13 11 20

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

Cancer Council Australia website

www.cancer.org.au

People Living with Cancer

www.plwc.org.za