Low dose cytarabine

This factsheet contains information about a type of chemotherapy treatment your doctor or nurse has prescribed called low dose cytarabine.

Why am I being given this treatment?
The possible benefits of chemotherapy treatment vary. For some people chemotherapy may reduce the risk of the cancer coming back, for others it may control the cancer and its symptoms. Your treatment will be fully explained by your doctor or nurse, who will be happy to answer any questions. You may find it useful to read the booklet ‘Chemotherapy: a guide’ that gives general information on chemotherapy and its side effects. Ask your nurse for a copy if you don’t have one, or search online on www.bloodwise.org.uk

What’s the treatment called?
Low dose cytarabine.

How will the drug be given?
• As a subcutaneous injection (under the skin, into the layer of tissue between the skin and muscle).
• This treatment is self-administered as an outpatient, which means you will give yourself the injections. You won’t need to stay in hospital for this treatment.

Important information about side effects
Sometimes cancer drugs can result in very serious side effects, which in rare cases may be life threatening. Please read the information below carefully, keeping this factsheet in a safe place in case you need to refer to it later.

Side effects
Increased risk of serious infection
You are vulnerable to infection while you are having chemotherapy. Minor infections can become life-threatening in a matter of hours if left untreated.

Temperature
We recommend that you use a digital thermometer so you can check your temperature. You can buy one from your local chemist. A normal temperature is between 36C and 37C.

When to seek medical advice
Seek medical help urgently if you have:
• a temperature below 36C with symptoms of infection such as:
  - fever
  - shivering
  - sweats
  - diarrhoea
  - discomfort when passing urine
  - cough
  - breathlessness
• a temperature of 37.5C or above

If you have any of the above symptoms you should contact the Macmillan acute oncology service helpline straight away on: 07867 973649. It is available 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

www.uhs.nhs.uk
Other potential side effects

Bruising or bleeding
This treatment can reduce the production of platelets which help the blood to clot. Let your doctor or nurse know by phone as soon as possible if you have any unexplained bruising or bleeding, such as nosebleeds, bloodspots or rashes on the skin, or bleeding gums. You may need a platelet transfusion. This is a type of blood transfusion (where blood or components of blood are taken from one person (the donor) and given to someone else).

Anaemia (low number of red blood cells)
While having this treatment you may become anaemic. This may make you feel unusually tired and breathless. Let your doctor or nurse know if these symptoms are a problem. You may need a blood transfusion.

Uncommon side effects

Nausea (feeling sick)
This is usually very mild as you are receiving a very low dose of chemotherapy. Anti-sickness medication can be prescribed to prevent this, so it’s important to tell your doctor or nurse if you are finding it a problem.

Skin irritation
Some redness and/or irritation may occur around the injection site. This is normally only temporary. You should change the site of injection each time to reduce skin reactions.

Fatigue (tiredness)
This chemotherapy may make you feel tired and lacking in energy. It can be frustrating when you feel unable to cope with routine tasks. If you feel tired, take a rest when necessary. However, there is a lot of evidence that some gentle exercise such as walking can be beneficial. Macmillan have produced an information sheet on fatigue that you may find useful. Visit www.macmillan.org.uk or call 0808 8080 000.

Diarrhoea
If this becomes a problem during or after your treatment, your doctor can prescribe anti-diarrhoea tablets.

Low appetite
Ask the staff for a copy of the Macmillan ‘Eating: Help Yourself’ leaflet which has some useful ideas about diet when you are having treatment. Visit www.macmillan.org.uk or call 0808 8080 000.

Sore mouth and taste changes
Following treatment your mouth may become sore and you may notice mouth ulcers. To prevent infection you should use an antibacterial mouthwash (chlorhexidine) available at all good chemists and larger supermarkets. Ask your doctor or nurse for advice. The chemotherapy booklet also has general mouth care advice. Occasionally during treatment you may experience a strange taste, sometimes described as metallic or bitter. A strongly flavoured sweet or mint will help disguise this.

Sex, contraception and fertility

Fertility
Chemotherapy may affect your ability to have children. If you have any concerns about your fertility, please discuss them with your doctor or clinical nurse specialist before you start treatment.

Protecting your partner and contraception
We recommend that you or your partner use a condom during sexual intercourse while you are having a course of chemotherapy. Chemotherapy may be present in semen and in the vagina which is dangerous to unborn babies. If you suspect that you may be pregnant please tell your doctor.
Late side effects
Most chemotherapy side effects are temporary and disappear once treatment is over. But for some people chemotherapy can cause long term changes in the body – these are sometimes called late side effects. The changes may happen months or many years after the chemotherapy has finished. If any problems with late side effects apply specifically to you, your doctor will discuss them with you and note this on your consent form.

Storage
Your injections will need to be kept in the fridge, taken out one hour before use.

Waste
You will be provided with a purple lidded sharps bin for wipes and syringes that can be returned to the hospital for disposal.

Safety
It's important to keep your injections and sharps bin out of the reach of children.

Further information or concerns
If you have any general questions or concerns about your treatment please contact the haematology CNS or the haematology and transplant day unit between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Haematology clinical nurse specialist (CNS)     023 8120 6293
Haematology day unit (C7)                      023 8120 3451

If you have urgent concerns outside of these hours call the Macmillan acute oncology service helpline on: 07867 973649.

Your consultant is: ...
Your hospital number is: ...
Your key worker is: ...

Useful links
www.macmillan.org.uk
www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer
www.bloodwise.org.uk

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.