

Patient information factsheet

Side effects of chemotherapy

Many people with cancer will have chemotherapy as part of their treatment. Chemotherapy can be an effective treatment for cancer, but it can also cause some side effects. Many of these can be treated or prevented and will pass once your treatment stops.

We've written this factsheet to give you more information about the common side effects of chemotherapy. If you have any further questions, please speak to a member of your healthcare team who will be pleased to advise you.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is a treatment for cancer that kills all rapidly dividing cells in the body. By stopping cancer cells from reproducing, this treatment stops cancer from growing into tumours and spreading in the body. Chemotherapy can be given as a tablet, injection or a drip (intravenous infusion).

Chemotherapy is given in cycles. For example, you may have treatment every week, or every two or three weeks. A cycle is the time between one round of treatment and the next. After each round of treatment you will have a break to allow your body to recover.

What are the common side effects?

Fatigue (extreme tiredness)

Fatigue is the most common side effect of cancer treatment. Fatigue can affect you mentally, physically and emotionally. To combat fatigue, we recommend staying active by doing some gentle exercises each day. Please don't push yourself too hard. Listen to your body and rest when you need to.

Infection

Chemotherapy can reduce your body's ability to fight infection. This makes you more likely to pick up infections that could make you seriously ill. For your own safety, you should look out for any early signs of an infection. These include:

- having a temperature of 37.5°C and above, or below 36°C
- having a fever or feeling shivery and shaky
- feeling unwell or having flu like symptoms

If you notice any of these symptoms, please call Macmillan acute oncology service (MAOS) straight away.

Nausea and vomiting

Many people who have chemotherapy will have periods where they feel sick or vomit. We will provide you with anti-sickness medication to take home after chemotherapy. You can also manage nausea and vomiting by:

- eating little and often
- having ginger-flavoured drinks or food
- sucking boiled sweets
- wearing motion sickness wristbands

If the anti-sickness medication we provide doesn't work or you are unable to eat or drink for more than 24 hours, please call MAOS.

Sore mouth

Sometimes chemotherapy can make the lining of your mouth feel sore and irritated (mucositis). Looking after your mouth and teeth will help to ease these side effects. We recommend you use a soft toothbrush and alcohol-free mouthwash or salt water. Due to potential infections or bleeding, we also recommend that you don't floss your teeth.

Please continue to see your dentist on a regular basis. You should let your dentist know that you are having chemotherapy and that you can't have any invasive dental procedures without speaking to your clinical nurse specialist or oncologist first.

Loss of appetite and taste

You may lose your appetite while you're having chemotherapy. You may find that eating little and often (including snacks) is better than having three large meals a day. We want you to stay the same weight as you were before you started treatment. To check this, we will weigh you at your appointments.

You may also find that food doesn't taste the same when you are having chemotherapy or you may lose your sense of taste. It may help to eat foods with strong flavours, for example meals containing herbs and spices.

Constipation and diarrhoea

Some people may experience constipation or diarrhoea after having chemotherapy. We recommend that you drink two litres of fluid a day to keep your bowels healthy and replace lost fluids. We may prescribe you medication to ease your symptoms. If either of these side effects become unmanageable, please contact MAOS.

Thrombosis (blood clots)

Some chemotherapy medication can increase your risk of developing blood clots. Blood clots can happen anywhere in the body, but are most common in the deep veins or in the lungs. To reduce your risk, you should move regularly, take deep breaths and circle your ankles.

Please contact MAOS if you have any of these symptoms in your legs or arms:

- swelling
- redness
- pain

Call **999** if you suddenly have difficulty breathing.

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Sensitive skin

Some people may have more sensitive skin during and after chemotherapy (up to one year). We recommend using fragrance-free moisturiser cream, such as E45 or Aveeno. Sun protection is also very important for everyone. We advise using a sun cream with an SPF of at least 30 and covering up or keeping out of the sun where possible.

Hair loss

Hair loss is a common side effect of chemotherapy and is almost always temporary. Only some treatments will make you lose your hair or cause thinning. These treatments may make your scalp sensitive. We suggest using gentle haircare products (shampoo and conditioner) and not dyeing your hair. Depending on your treatment, you may be able to try scalp cooling (treatment to prevent hair loss).

Some people who experience hair loss may decide to wear a wig. If this is the case, you may be eligible for a voucher towards the cost. We understand that losing your hair can be upsetting. Please do speak to us if you are worried about it.

Fertility issues

Some chemotherapy medicines can reduce fertility in men and women. This is often temporary, but can be permanent in some cases. If you are considering starting a family in the future, please talk to your consultant before starting chemotherapy.

You should avoid becoming pregnant or fathering a child during your treatment, as chemotherapy medicines can harm an unborn baby. You should use barrier contraception, such as condoms, to protect your partner from any contact with chemotherapy.

Medication

Please make your doctor aware of any medications or herbal remedies you are taking. You will be able to collect your prescription from the outpatient pharmacy at the main entrance of Southampton General Hospital.

Starting treatment

On the day of your chemotherapy appointment, you should:

- collect your prescription
- bring snacks and entertainment with you
- not drive (especially after your first treatment), as you may have a bad reaction to the medication
- get your car parking validated and reduced to £2 at Hamwic House or at our radiotherapy reception

If you are worried about anything, please remember you can talk to one of the team. We are all here to help.

Useful links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/chemotherapy

www.macmillan.org.uk

www.cancerresearchuk.org

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Contact us

If you have any uncontrolled symptoms or if you feel unwell, please contact Macmillan acute oncology service (MAOS).

Telephone: **023 8120 1345** (24-hour emergency number)

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**