

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy (chemo) is the use of drugs to fight cancer. It affects cells that grow quickly, like cancer cells. It can also affect some of your normal cells. It may be used alone or with surgery and/or radiation.

Chemo is given to:

- Kill cancer cells.
- Keep your cancer from spreading to other parts of your body.
- Slow cancer growth.
- Prepare you for other treatments like radiation or surgery.
- Help with pain.
- Get you ready for a transplant.

How Chemotherapy is Given

It can be given in many ways:

- As a tablet, capsule, or liquid, taken by mouth.
- Into a vein or artery.
- As an injection:
 - Just under the skin (subcutaneous or subQ).
 - Into a muscle (intramuscular or IM).
 - Into the belly cavity (intraperitoneal or IP)
 - Into the spinal fluid (intrathecal or IT)
 - Into the tumor.

Chemotherapy Schedule

Chemotherapy is given on a regular schedule, sometimes with breaks between treatments. It may be given daily, weekly, or monthly. The schedule depends on the type of cancer you have. It also depends on the drug(s) you are given. Your doctor or nurse will explain your schedule to you. Many patients find a written calendar helpful to remember when chemo will be given.

Side Effects

Your cancer team will tell you which side effects are most often seen with the drugs you get. It is important to let your health care team know about any problems you have. There are many things that can be done to help you.

Chemo kills cancer cells. It can also hurt some normal cells. The most common side effects occur because of damage to these normal cells.

Normal cells affected by chemotherapy	Side effects that may occur
Lining of the mouth, stomach, and colon	Mouth and throat soreness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
Hair follicles	Hair loss
Skin	Dryness/rash
Blood cells	Low blood counts, fatigue, increased risk for infection, bleeding

The side effects can depend on many factors:

- How your body responds.
- The type of chemo. Each drug has different side effects.
- The dose of chemo.
- How the drug is given and over what time frame.
- Your overall health.

Blood Counts Affected by Chemotherapy

There are three basic types of cells that make up your blood:

- **Red cells** – carry oxygen. When your red cell count is low, it is called **anemia**.
- **White cells** – fight infection. When your white cell count is low, it is called **neutropenia**.
- **Platelets** – help clot your blood. If your platelet count is low, it is called **thrombocytopenia**. When your platelet counts are low, you are more at risk for bleeding.

Eating Challenges

Chemo can affect appetite in these ways:

- Changes in the sense of taste and smell.
- Loss of appetite, or low appetite.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Feeling full or bloated.

Keep in mind that changes in appetite may come and go throughout treatment. Follow these suggestions to help reduce your symptoms:

- Meet with a dietitian at the Carbone Cancer Center to learn how to manage treatment side effects. Call **(608) 265-1700** to set-up an appointment at your next clinic visit.
- Use your anti-nausea medicines as prescribed. If you are unsure when to take them, ask your nurse for a written schedule.
- Eat dry foods like crackers, pretzels, or toast first thing in the morning. This may help relieve nausea.
- On the day of treatment, eat a light meal or snack. **Avoid** heavy, greasy foods.

- Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Water, clear sodas like Sprite[®], ginger ale, fruit juice, decaffeinated tea, and broth are hydrating.
- **Call your healthcare team if you are not able to drink.**

Sexuality and Fertility

- Chemo can affect the production of sperm. Men may want to ask their doctor or nurse about sperm banking before starting chemo.
- Women may go into early menopause. They may want to ask their doctor or nurse about egg harvesting before starting chemo. They may notice increased vaginal dryness. Lubricants may be used.
- Chemo can be present in body fluids for 48 hours after completion of treatment. It is important to avoid sex during these two days after chemo.
- You will need to use birth control during your treatment and for several months after the treatment is finished. This prevents pregnancy for yourself or your partner.
- If your platelets or white blood cells are low, you may need to avoid intercourse until those blood counts return to normal.
- Talk with your partner about how the treatment affects you. It is normal to have changes in sexual desire during this time.

Discuss any questions with your health care team. We may be able to help you manage changes during this time.

Sunlight Sensitivity

You will be more sensitive to sunlight during treatment. This will last for a few months after. All patients should follow these precautions:

- Avoid direct sunlight as much as you can.
- Use a sunscreen lotion of SPF 30 or higher. Make sure to apply to your head as well if you are losing your hair.
- Wear a hat that fully covers your head when outside. This will help if you are losing your hair.

How long do the side effects last?

Some side effects may occur within the first 24-48 hours after treatment and then go away. Others side effects occur days after your treatment. Fatigue, or feeling tired, is a common side effect. This may last longer than other side effects. You may need to make changes in your normal routines and work schedule.

If you have questions or concerns, please call:

Clinic: _____

Phone number: _____

Your doctor is: _____

Phone number: _____

Your nurse is: _____

Phone number: _____

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 1/2023 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5070.