



# Patient Information

## Coping with Chemotherapy

**C**ancer occurs when abnormal cells begin dividing and forming new cells rapidly and beyond the body's control. *Chemotherapy* (key-moe-ther-uh-pee) is a cancer treatment that uses drugs to kill these rapidly dividing cells. Whether chemotherapy is offered as a treatment option depends on the type of cancer, as well as such factors as the person's age, general health, and preferences.

In some cases, chemotherapy—alone or with other treatments—can cure a person's cancer by eliminating all cancer cells. Even when it can't prevent the growth or spread of cancer cells, it may kill enough of them to help the person live more comfortably. Before you decide to begin chemotherapy, your doctor should explain how likely this therapy is to succeed for you and the possible risks it poses to your health.

### How is chemotherapy given?

Once you decide to undergo chemotherapy, your doctor will design a treatment plan that specifies the drugs you will receive and how, where, and how often they will be administered. Usually, chemotherapy treatment plans include periods when you receive medication and periods when you don't so that your body can rest and recover.

Some chemotherapy drugs are swallowed as pills, absorbed through the skin, or injected just under the skin or into a muscle. Most chemotherapy drugs, however, are injected into a vein. If you receive treatments this way often, a *catheter* (**kath**-uht-uhr)—a thin, flexible, plastic tube that

can be left in place for a long time—may be used. You may need to visit your doctor's office or a special chemotherapy clinic (or, in some cases, be admitted to the hospital) to receive chemotherapy.

### What are the side effects?

Unfortunately, chemotherapy harms some healthy cells along with cancer cells. Certain side effects will disappear shortly after treatment ends, but others may be permanent or may not appear until years later.

Common short-term effects of chemotherapy include fatigue; hair loss; nausea and vomiting; diarrhea or constipation; mouth or throat sores; and taste changes, loss of appetite, and weight loss. These occur mostly as a result of damage to the rapidly dividing cells of the hair roots and digestive tract.

In addition, chemotherapy can suppress the production of certain blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen throughout your body, so a low red blood cell level—known as *anemia* (uh-nee-mee-uh)—can leave you feeling tired, dizzy, or short of breath. White blood cells are important to the immune system, and a low level of them increases your chances of getting an infection. Platelets are cells that help your blood clot, so a low platelet count can make you bruise easily or bleed heavily after a minor cut. All of your blood cell counts will be checked throughout treatment. If needed, your doctor may boost your blood cell counts with medication or a blood transfusion.

Chemotherapy also can cause short- or long-term damage to other organs of your

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body, including the heart, lungs, kidneys and bladder, liver, sexual organs, nervous system, and skin. Since the chances of developing these problems often depend on the type of chemotherapy drugs used (and other treatments you've received), ask your doctor which symptoms to watch for and when to seek medical attention. Your doctor will perform various tests throughout treatment to make sure your organs are functioning well.

### How can I minimize the side effects?

Inevitably, you will feel less than your best during chemotherapy. But you can take steps to deal with some side effects and prevent others. For example, to fight fatigue, take short walks or perform other types of light exercise daily, if you are able, and work short rest periods into your schedule. Drinking lots of fluids and eating a well balanced diet—with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and fiber and limited amounts of caffeine and alcohol—can help with constipation, diarrhea, and fatigue.

To prevent infections, wash your hands often, especially before eating; avoid large crowds and people who are sick; and keep open wounds clean. Call your doctor if you develop a fever, chills, or other signs of infection—or if you experience signs of impaired blood clotting, such as unexpected bruising; small, red spots underneath the skin; bleeding gums; urine that is streaked pink or red; bowel movements that are black or bloody; vision changes; and headaches.

If hair loss is a possibility with your chemotherapy drugs, use a mild shampoo and a soft hair brush and avoid dying your hair or drying it on high heat. You may want to consider cutting your hair short (to make it look thicker) or trying a wig.

Keep your mouth healthy by brushing your teeth and gums with a soft toothbrush after every meal. To avoid irritating your mouth and throat, try eating soft, soothing foods (such as soft fruits, baby food, scrambled eggs, and gelatin) and staying away from alcohol-based mouthwashes and acidic, salty, spicy, or rough foods.

To relieve nausea and vomiting, your doctor may prescribe *antiemetic* (ant-ee-uh-**met**-ick) medications. You also can try eating and drinking slowly, eating several small meals throughout the day (rather than fewer large ones), and drinking fluids at least an hour after a meal (rather than with a meal).

If you're having sexual problems, let your doctor know (there may be medications or advice he or she can provide) and share your concerns with your partner. Because chemotherapy drugs can cause birth defects, it's important to use birth control if you are sexually active while receiving chemotherapy.

The side effects of chemotherapy can be hard to handle, especially all at once. It's essential to draw on sources of support, such as loved ones, support groups, and counseling professionals. To learn more about chemotherapy, ways to cope, and support groups in your area, ask your doctor or visit the web sites of the American Cancer Society ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).) and the National Cancer Institute ([www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)). ●

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