

This brochure is for patients who are receiving chemotherapy for cancer. It describes what to expect during chemotherapy and what you can do to take care of yourself during and after treatment.

What Can You Do?

- Eat the right foods to build up your strength.
- Stay away from people with a cold or the flu.
- Get the rest you need and pace yourself.
- Talk about your feelings to deal with any sadness, anger, or fear you may have.
- Work as a team with your health care providers. Knowing how to help yourself can make you feel more in control.

What is Chemotherapy & how Does it Work?

Chemotherapy is the treatment of cancer with drugs that can destroy cancer cells. These drugs often are called “anticancer” drugs.

Normal cells grow and die in a controlled way. When cancer occurs, cells in the body that are not normal keep dividing and forming more cells without control. Anticancer drugs destroy cancer cells by stopping them from growing or multiplying.

Healthy cells can also be harmed, especially those that divide quickly. Harm to healthy cells is what causes side effects. These cells usually repair themselves after chemotherapy.

What Causes Side Effects?

Because cancer cells may grow and divide more rapidly than normal cells, many anticancer drugs are made to kill growing cells. But certain normal, healthy cells also multiply quickly, and chemotherapy can affect these cells, too. This damage to normal cells causes side effects.

You may have none of these side effects or just a few. The kinds of side effects you have and how severe they are depend on the type and dose of chemotherapy you get and how your body reacts. Before starting chemotherapy, your doctor will discuss the side

effects that you are most likely to get with the drugs you will be receiving. Before starting the treatment, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You should be given all the facts about treatment including the drugs you will be given and their side effects before you sign the consent form.

Normal cells usually recover when chemotherapy is over, so most side effects gradually go away after treatment ends, and the healthy cells have a chance to grow normally. The time it takes to get over side effects depends on many things, including your overall health and the kind of chemotherapy you have been taking.

The side effects of chemotherapy can be unpleasant, but they must be measured against the treatment’s ability to destroy cancer. Medicines can help prevent some side effects such as nausea. Sometimes people receiving chemotherapy become discouraged about the length of time their treatment is taking or the side effects they are having. If that happens to you, talk to your doctor or nurse. They may be able to suggest ways to make side effects easier to deal with or reduce them.

Suggestions for dealing with some of the more common side effects of chemotherapy.

Fatigue - feeling tired and lacking energy, is the most commonly reported symptom.

How can I cope with fatigue

- Plan your day so that you have time to rest.
- Take short naps or breaks.
- Talk to your health care provider about ways to save your energy and treat your fatigue.
- Eat and drink plenty of fluids. Eat small amounts at a time, if that is helpful.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol.
- Allow others to do things for you.
- Report any changes in energy level to your doctor or nurse.

Nausea and Vomiting - many patients fear that they will have nausea and vomiting while receiving chemotherapy. New drugs have made these side effects less common and, when they do occur, much less severe.

What can I do if I have nausea and vomiting?

- Drink liquids at least an hour before or after meal time, instead of with your meals. Drink frequently and drink small amounts.
- Eat and drink slowly.
- Eat small meals throughout the day, instead of one, two or three large meals.
- Eat foods cold or at room temperature so you won’t be bothered by strong smells.
- Drink cool, clear unsweetened fruit juices, such as apple or grape juice or light-colored sodas such as ginger ale that have lost their fizz and do not have caffeine.
- Avoid sweet, fried, or fatty foods.
- Avoid eating for at least a few hours before treatment if nausea usually occurs during chemotherapy.
- Eat a light meal before treatment.

Hair Loss - (alopecia) is a common side effect of chemotherapy, but not all drugs cause hair loss. Your doctor can tell you if hair loss might occur with the drug or drugs you are taking.

How can I care for my scalp and hair during chemotherapy?

- Use a mild shampoo.
- Use a soft hairbrush.
- Use low heat when drying your hair.
- Have your hair cut short. A shorter style will make your hair look thicker and fuller and will make hair loss easier to manage if it occurs.
- Use a sunscreen, sun block, hat or soft scarf to protect your scalp from the sun if you lose hair on your head.
- Avoid dying, perming, or relaxing your hair.

Infection - chemotherapy can make you more likely to get infections.

Your doctor will check your blood cell count often while you are getting chemotherapy. Most infections come from bacteria normally found on your skin and in your mouth, intestines and genital tract. Sometimes, the cause of an infection may not be known. Even if you take extra care, you still may get an infection. But there are some things you can do.

How can I prevent infections?

- Wash your hands often during the day. Be sure to wash them before you eat, after you use the bathroom, and after touching animals.
- Stay away from people who have illnesses you can catch, such as a cold
- Try to avoid crowds.
- Stay away from children who recently have received “live virus” vaccines such as chicken pox and oral polio, since they may be contagious to people with a low blood cell count. Call your doctor or local health department if you have any questions.
- Clean cuts and scrapes right away and daily until healed with warm water, soap, and an antiseptic.
- Avoid contact with animal litter boxes and waste, birdcages, and fish tanks.
- Do not get any immunizations, such as flu or pneumonia shots, without checking with your doctor first.

Mouth, Gum, and Throat Problems - good oral care is important during cancer treatment. Some anti-cancer drugs can cause sores in the mouth and throat, a condition called stomatitis or mucositis. Anticancer drugs also can make these tissues dry and irritated or cause them to bleed.

How can I keep my mouth, gums, and throat healthy?

- Talk to your doctor about seeing your dentist at least several weeks before you start chemotherapy. You may need to have your teeth cleaned and to take care of any problems such as cavities, gum abscesses, gum disease, or poorly fitting dentures. Ask your dentist to show you the best ways to brush and floss your teeth during chemotherapy. Chemotherapy can make you more likely to get cavities, so your dentist may suggest using a fluoride rinse or gel each day to help prevent decay.
- Rinse your mouth 3 times a day with a mixture of 1 teaspoon baking soda dissolved in a cup of warm water.
- Brush your teeth and gums after every meal. Use a soft toothbrush and gentle touch.
- Rinse your toothbrush well after each use and store it in a dry place.
- Avoid mouthwashes that contain any amount of alcohol.

