

Getting Ready for Chemotherapy

What to Expect before, during, and after Your Treatment

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The Basics

Part 1

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is medicine used to treat cancer. Because cancer cells grow and divide quickly, these drugs are made to kill fast-growing cells.

But you have other fast-growing cells in your body, including those in your blood, hair, mouth, and skin. Chemotherapy drugs **can't** tell the difference between these healthy cells and the cancer cells. When the drugs damage your healthy cells, it can cause side effects.

Your doctor or nurse will explain how your chemotherapy drugs might affect you.

How is chemotherapy given?

It depends on the drugs your doctor has prescribed. Usually, chemotherapy is given in one of three ways: by mouth; by a shot in the skin or muscle; or by IV (liquid that flows through a tiny needle in the vein).

Most people don't notice anything special when they get their chemotherapy. But everyone is different. If you feel something strange, tell your nurse. It may mean you're having a reaction to the drug.

Chemotherapy works best when you follow your treatment schedule. Your schedule should not be changed without a very good reason.

How long and how often you get chemotherapy depends on your type of cancer, the drugs you're taking, how the cancer responds to these drugs, and what side effects you may have.

How can I get ready for treatment?

Please arrange to have any dental work done before you start treatment.

If you think you may be pregnant, tell your doctor. Chemotherapy can cause birth defects. If you are pregnant, you'll need to discuss your options before starting treatment.

If you plan on having children, ask about your options. Chemotherapy may affect your ability to have children in the future.

For 48 hours before chemotherapy:

- Try to drink 8 to 10 large glasses of fluid. Avoid alcohol.
- Get plenty of rest. Avoid heavy activity.
- Take your medicines as directed.

The night before your treatment: Eat a light meal. Try to eat bland foods.

On the day of treatment: Eat another light meal in the morning. Again, bland foods are best.

Wear comfortable clothing to the clinic. If you have a port, wear a button-down shirt so your nurse can get to it easily.

Side Effects

Part 2

Chemotherapy has greatly improved in recent years, and **most side effects can be treated**. We will help you manage your side effects to make your treatment as easy as possible.

Below, your nurse will check off the side effects you are most likely to have. It's important to tell us about any symptoms so we can treat them right away.

There is more detailed information on each side effect in the pages that follow.

☐ **Anemia (low red blood cell count):**

Anemia means you don't have enough red blood cells in your blood. When your red blood cells are low, they cannot carry enough oxygen to your body. This leaves you feeling tired, dizzy, chilled, or out of breath when doing normal activities. You're more likely to develop anemia if you're being treated with chemotherapy.

☐ **Constipation (hard, dry bowel movements that are difficult to pass):**

Many things can cause this, including cancer treatment, pain medicine, too little activity, depression, poor diet, and not drinking enough fluids.

☐ **Depression and anxiety:**

Cancer treatment can bring major changes to your life. It can affect your overall health and well-being, disrupt your daily routines and put a strain on your relationships. It's normal for you and your family to feel sad, anxious, angry, or depressed.

☐ **Diarrhea (loose, watery bowel movements):**

Normally, the cells in your digestive tract (your gut) absorb fluid back into your body. But chemotherapy can damage these cells, causing more fluid to stay in the gut. This leads to diarrhea.

☐ **Fatigue (feeling very tired):**

This often occurs 3 to 4 days after starting chemotherapy. It may get worse 10 to 14 days after treatment, then improve until the next treatment.

☐ **Hair loss:**

Some chemotherapy may result in complete hair loss or thinning of the hair. This can affect the head, eyebrows, eyelashes, and groin area. It may start right after treatment or up to 21 days later. No one can say how your hair will change, but it's usually temporary. It may take up to a year to grow back. It might have a different color or texture.

☐ **Hand-and-foot syndrome:**

This occurs when chemotherapy damages the fast-growing cells in your hands and feet. Symptoms include pain, redness, cracked or peeling skin, as well as swelling of the hands or feet. These symptoms can occur 2 to 10 months after starting treatment.

☐ **Memory loss:**

Research has shown that chemotherapy can affect the thinking functions of the brain. (This is often referred to as "chemo brain.") Affected areas may include concentration, memory, understanding, and reasoning. Researchers are trying to find ways to help prevent and treat "chemo brain."

☐ **Mouth sores:**

Cancer treatment can damage the fast-growing cells in your mouth and throat. Symptoms often occur 3 to 10 days after treatment begins. You may feel a burning in your mouth and throat before the sores appear. Your mouth may be red. You may have some pain.

☐ **Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) and vomiting (throwing up):**

Chemotherapy affects the stomach lining, which may cause nausea and vomiting. We can often control this with medicine. The amount of nausea and vomiting varies for each person.

☐ **Neuropathy (short-term or long-term nerve damage) and cold sensitivity:**

Some chemotherapy drugs can damage certain nerves. This may make you more sensitive to cold. The most common symptoms include tingling or numbness in the fingers and toes, pain when you touch cold objects, and a sense of choking when you have cold drinks.

☐ **Neutropenia (low white blood cell count):**

Neutropenia means you don't have enough white blood cells in your blood. This is a common side effect of cancer treatment. Your white blood cells protect you from infection. If they become too low, the risk of infection increases.

☐ **Sexual concerns:**

Chemotherapy can make you sterile (unable to have children). If you get monthly periods, they may stop for a time. You may also have short-term symptoms of menopause, such as vaginal dryness.

☐ **Skin and nails:**

You may have minor skin problems during chemotherapy. These could include redness, rashes, itching, peeling, dryness, pimples, and increased sensitivity to the sun. Your nails may become dark, brittle or cracked. They might develop vertical lines or bands.

☐ **Thrombocytopenia (low platelet count):**

Platelets are the parts of your blood that help with clotting. For example, when you cut your finger, platelets help stop the bleeding. When your platelets are low, you're more likely to bleed longer.

At Home

Part 3

How should I care for myself at home?

Nutrition

Your body needs energy to heal. So:

- Eat a well-balanced diet. Try to eat regular meals. You may prefer smaller meals more often.
- Drink 8 to 10 large glasses of fluid a day. You can get the fluids you need from water, soup, milk, juice, broth, Popsicles, sports drinks, and other liquids without caffeine.
- Avoid alcohol for 48 hours after treatment. Alcohol can be hard on the liver. After 48 hours, it may be OK to have a small glass of wine or beer each day if your doctor says it's OK.

Rest

Try to stay well rested. Allow for rest periods in between your normal activities.

Exercise

Simple exercise for 10 to 15 minutes a day can help increase your energy level. Try stretching, walking, or riding an exercise bike. Talk to your doctor before starting a mild exercise program.

Hair, skin, and nail care

Hair loss is a common side effect of chemotherapy, though **not** all drugs cause hair loss. If you begin to lose your hair:

- Use mild shampoo and a soft hairbrush. If you must use a hair dryer, use low heat.
- Don't use brush rollers to set your hair. Don't dye, perm, or relax your hair.
- Have your hair cut short. A shorter style will make your hair look thicker and fuller. It will also make your hair loss easier to manage.
- Use sunscreen or a scarf, hat, or wig to protect your scalp from the sun.

Some people who lose all or most of their hair choose to wear hats, scarves, turbans, wigs, or hair pieces. Others leave their heads uncovered.

You may have **minor skin problems** during treatment, such as redness, rashes, itching, peeling, dryness, pimples, and being more sensitive to the sun.

- Try to keep your skin clean and dry.
- To help prevent dryness, take quick showers or sponge baths. Don't take long, hot baths. Use a soap that moisturizes the skin.
- Use creams or lotions while your skin is still moist.
- Avoid perfume, cologne and aftershave lotion that contains alcohol.
- Avoid direct sunlight as much as you can. Wear long-sleeve shirts, pants, and hats to block the sun. Use sunscreen (SPF 30 or higher). Use a lip balm with an SPF.

During treatment you may notice **changes to your fingernails**. Your nails may become dark, brittle, or cracked. Or they may have lines or bands. To protect your nails, wear gloves when washing dishes, gardening, or doing housework. Avoid nail polish.

Dental work

If you need dental work while on chemotherapy, check with your doctor first. Dental work may not be a problem if your blood counts are normal.

Sexuality

It's important for adults of all genders to prevent pregnancy during this time. No one knows how these drugs might affect an unborn baby. Please use birth control during treatment and for several months afterward.

If you are a new mother, **don't** feed your breast milk to your baby.

Chemotherapy is **not** likely to affect whether you enjoy sex. If you have sexual concerns or problems, talk to your doctor.

If you get monthly periods, they may stop or become irregular. Or you may have breakthrough bleeding. You may also have symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes or vaginal dryness. These changes will go away in time.

How should I handle body waste at home?

Chemotherapy drugs are flushed from the body when you use the toilet. The drugs may appear in your pee and poop for 48 hours after stopping treatment. They also appear in vomit, blood, and other body fluids.

Even in your body waste, the drugs can have toxic effects. It's important to keep others from coming into contact with your waste. Flush the toilet

2 times with the lid closed until 48 hours after your chemotherapy has ended.

You and your loved ones should follow the guidelines below until 48 hours after chemotherapy has ended.

Linen and clothing

1. Use items that can be washed.
2. If clothing or linens are soiled with body waste, blood, vomit, or chemotherapy drugs, put them in a plastic bag until they can be washed.
3. As soon as you can, wash the soiled items **2 times** in hot water. Keep them separate from other laundry. You may use your normal detergent. Use the highest water level in the washing machine.
4. Once the items are washed, put the used bag into a larger leak-proof bag. Throw this out with your weekly trash. Keep the bag away from pets, children, and places where food is prepared.

Bedpans and basins (containers for vomiting)

1. Wear disposable, waterproof gloves to handle bedpans and basins.
2. Empty these containers into the toilet, then flush **2 times**. If any fluid splashes onto the toilet seat or other surface, wash it with soap and water.
3. After each use, wash bedpans and basins with soap and water. Rinse with clear water. Flush the rinse water down the toilet.

If you throw up in a sink, wash the sink with cleanser and water.

4. Place your used gloves in a leak-proof plastic bag. Throw this out with your weekly trash. Keep the bag away from pets, children, and places where food is prepared.
5. Always wash your hands after taking off the gloves.

Diapers

If the person having chemotherapy wears diapers:

1. Wear disposable, waterproof gloves when changing the diaper.
2. If you can, use disposable diapers. Place used diapers in a leak-proof plastic bag. Throw this out with your weekly trash. Keep the bag away from pets, children, and places where food is prepared.

If using cloth diapers, wash soiled diapers **2 times**. For the first wash, follow the steps listed under “Linens and clothing.” For the second wash, use baby detergent.

3. Place your used gloves in a leak-proof plastic bag. Throw this out with your weekly trash. Keep the bag away from pets, children, and places where food is prepared.
4. Always wash your hands after taking off the gloves.

Accidents

If someone else’s skin touches any body waste, wash with soap and water. Call the doctor for more instructions.

If body waste gets into someone else’s eye, wash the eyes with water or an isotonic eyewash (artificial tears) for 10 to 15 minutes. Call the doctor for more instructions.

How can I prevent illness and injury ?

- Wash your hands well after using the bathroom and before eating. If dry skin is **not** a problem, take a bath or shower daily.
- Check your skin for signs of infection (redness, swelling, soreness, warmth, or drainage). Report these symptoms to your doctor or nurse.
- If your blood counts are low, avoid crowds and sick people. Wear a mask if you must be in public.
- If you feel chilled, take your temperature.
- Make sure all food is properly handled, washed, and cooked.
- Use an electric shaver instead of a razor.
- Check with your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medicines for pain or fever.
- Don’t take over-the-counter cold medicines or drugs to reduce pain or fever (such as aspirin, Aleve, Advil or ibuprofen) unless prescribed by your doctor. If you want to take any over-the-counter medicine or herbal product, talk to your doctor first.
- Blow your nose gently to prevent injury. The lining in your nose will be very tender from the chemotherapy.
- During sex, use a water-soluble gel (such as K-Y Jelly or Astroglide). Afterward, you should empty your bladder, then gently clean your genitals with warm soap and water. All of this will help prevent infection.
- **Don’t** have sex (intercourse) when your white blood cells or platelets are low.

Special Instructions

Part 4

Your nurse will check off other steps you need to take below.

- ☐ Review household precautions.
- ☐ For 48 hours after treatment, drink 8 to 10 large glasses of fluid each day.
- ☐ For 48 hours after treatment, urinate (pee) at least every 4 hours while awake. Pee at least 1 time during the night.
- ☐ Rinse your mouth after meals and before bedtime.
To make the mouth rinse, mix:
 - 1 teaspoon salt
 - 1 teaspoon baking soda
 - 1 quart water

Swish, then spit. You should also use a soft toothbrush to brush your teeth.

- ☐ Avoid cold temperatures.
 - Everything you drink should be warm or at room temperature. No cold drinks or ice cubes.
 - **Don't** eat cold foods, such as ice cream.
 - Cover up when you go outside in cold weather. Wear a scarf and gloves.
 - Avoid air-conditioning, even in your car.
 - **Don't** use ice chips.
 - **Don't** use ice packs.
 - Keep gloves in the kitchen. Put them on before you handle items from the refrigerator.
 - Remember that metal tends to be cold. Wear gloves before touching your car, mailbox, or other metal objects.
 - Remember that tile and linoleum floors can be cold. Wear socks and shoes.

- ☐ Your doctor wants you to take medicine called _____.

This is used to treat **nausea and vomiting**. Follow these directions: _____

☐ Your doctor wants you to take medicine called

_____.

This is used to treat **constipation** (hard, dry bowel movements). Follow these directions: _____

_____.

☐ Your doctor wants you to take medicine called

_____.

This is used to treat **diarrhea** (loose or watery bowel movements). Follow these directions: _____

_____.

Notes:

When to Call the Doctor

Part 5

Call your doctor or nurse **right away** if you have any of these symptoms:

- Rash, hives or itching
- Severe diarrhea (stools that are watery, tar-colored or have blood in them)
- Severe constipation for 3 days (stools that are hard to pass and have not been helped by medicine)
- Vomiting (throwing up) that lasts more than 24 hours after your treatment
- Strange bruising or bleeding, including nose bleeds and bleeding gums
- Sore mouth or throat
- Peeing less than 1 cup (8 ounces) a day, burning when you pee, or blood in the urine
- Fever at or above 100.4°F (38°C) or shaking chills
- Feeling faint
- Feeling more and more tired
- Pain at or around where your needle was
- Trouble using your hands
- Any changes in your skin or eyesight
- Ringing in the ears or hearing loss
- Problems coping with your feelings, including sadness, anxiety, anger, or depression that gets in the way of your normal daily life
- Any other changes that concern you

