



Understanding Chemotherapy

Being prepared and knowing more about chemotherapy can help lessen some of the stress surrounding your treatment. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of chemotherapy.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. Sometimes a number of drugs are given at the same time. This is referred to as combination chemotherapy. In other cases, only one drug is used.

Chemotherapy may be used before or after surgery or radiation therapy, or together with radiation therapy.

Medical oncologists and haematologists specialise in prescribing chemotherapy and hormone therapy.

Why is chemotherapy given?

The aim of chemotherapy treatment may be to:

- cure the cancer
- reduce the chance of the cancer coming back – sometimes very small cells that were not detected can be destroyed with chemotherapy
- shrink a cancer before receiving your primary treatment (such as surgery or radiation therapy)
- reduce symptoms and prolong good quality of life.

Where and how is chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy can be given to you as an outpatient in a chemotherapy clinic or in a doctor's office. Sometimes a short stay in hospital is necessary to give a longer or more complex chemotherapy treatment.

Treatment can be given in several ways:

- by mouth
- slowly injected through a needle inserted into a vein
- through a tube called a catheter into a large vein, usually in the neck or chest (the catheter remains in place throughout the course of the treatment)
- directly into an organ or tissue affected by cancer.

Some forms of chemotherapy are given for a few days or weeks, some for months and some on a long-term basis.

How and when you receive chemotherapy depends on the type of cancer you have, the way it responds to treatment and your ability to tolerate the treatment. Your doctor will talk to you about your course of treatment.

Is chemotherapy painful?

Chemotherapy should not cause pain and discomfort, but some medications cause a burning sensation in the veins. If this occurs, tell the nurse immediately.

If after treatment you notice tenderness and redness near the the injection site, contact the chemotherapy unit or a doctor right away.

What are the side-effects?

Chemotherapy can cause side-effects in some people. Different drugs cause different side-effects. Having side-effects is not related to whether the treatment is working or not.

Side-effects are often temporary and can be treated with other medications. Possible side-effects include:

- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea or constipation
- fatigue (tiredness)
- mouth sores or ulcers
- increased risk of infection
- increased risk of bruising
- hair loss
- muscle weakness
- skin sensitivity to sunlight
- dry or tired eyes
- loss of appetite.

Where can I get reliable information?

- **Cancer Council NSW 13 11 20. Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia. www.cancercouncil.com.au**
- **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) 13 14 50**