

# Understanding chemotherapy



**Being prepared and understanding what chemotherapy is can help lessen some of the stress surrounding your treatment. Ask your oncologist, doctor or nurse any other questions you may have before, during and after treatment. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of chemotherapy.**

## What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy refers to the use of anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. In most treatments a number of drugs may be given at the same time. This is referred to as combination chemotherapy. Sometimes 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 treating cancer with chemotherapy and hormone therapy.

## How is chemotherapy given?

Treatment may be given in several ways:

- By mouth.
- Through a needle inserted into a vein, slowly injecting the medication.
- Through a catheter (a special tube), placed in a large vein, usually in the neck or chest which remains there throughout the course of the treatment.
- By introducing drugs directly into an organ or tissue affected by cancer.

## Is chemotherapy painful?

Chemotherapy should cause no discomfort, but some medications may cause a burning sensation in the veins. If at any time while you are receiving a chemotherapy injection it hurts or burns, immediately tell the nurse who is giving you the drug. Likewise, if after your treatment you notice some tenderness and redness develop over the injection site, contact the chemotherapy unit immediately.

## Why is chemotherapy given?

**To cure cancer** – with some types of cancer, chemotherapy will destroy all the cancer cells and cure the disease.

**To reduce the chance of the cancer coming back** – chemotherapy may be given after surgery or radiation therapy so if any cancer cells remain which are too small to see, they may be destroyed.

**To shrink a cancer prior to primary treatment** – chemotherapy may be given to increase the success of your primary treatment, such as surgery or radiation therapy.

**To shrink a cancer, to improve symptoms and to prolong life** – chemotherapy may be given to shrink and control

cancer and reduce the number of cancer cells. If cure is not possible it may be used to reduce cancer symptoms and prolong a good quality of life.

## How often and how long is chemotherapy?

Some forms of chemotherapy are given for a few days or a few weeks, some for a period of months and some on a long-term basis. This will depend 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 the time period planned for your course of treatment.

## Where is treatment 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.

## What are the possible side-effects?

Chemotherapy can produce side-effects in some but not all people. Different chemotherapy drugs cause different side-effects. Side-effects are often temporary and can usually be treated with other medications. Possible side-effects include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhoea or constipation (often due to anti-nausea medication)
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Mouth sores or ulcers
- Increased risk of infection
- Increased risk of bruising
- Hair loss
- Muscle weakness
- Skin sensitivity to sunlight (specific drugs only)
- Dry or tired eyes.
- Loss of appetite.

Side-effects generally settle down once chemotherapy is completed. Having any of the above side-effects is not related to whether the chemotherapy is working or not.

**Remember, if you have any concerns or questions, please contact your doctor.**

## Where can I get reliable information?

**Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20**

Information and support for you and your family for the cost of a local call anywhere in Australia.

**Cancer Council Australia website**

(with links to state and territory Cancer Councils)

**[www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)**

**People Living with Cancer**

**[www.plwc.org](http://www.plwc.org)**