

What are common side effects and what can I do?

Each chemotherapy drug and drug combinations have different side effects. It depends on which drugs you will be getting the dosage of the drugs, and the combination of the drugs.

Often times your blood counts will be lowered for a week or so. This starts about a week or 10 days after your chemotherapy has started.

You are more vulnerable to infection because your white blood cell count is lower. White blood cells help your body to fight infection.

You might feel tired and have less energy. This is because your red blood cell count is lower and red blood cells carry oxygen to your tissues. You might also bruise more easily. This is because your platelet count is lower, and platelets help with clotting so you won't bleed.

Another frequent side effect can be nausea. Your oncology nurse will help prevent nausea by giving you medicine to prevent or control the nausea before it happens. If the medicine doesn't work as well as you'd like it to, call your oncology nurse. He or she may be able to have the doctor order you a different anti-nausea medication.

There are many other side effects. Your nurse should go over the side effects with you so you will understand what to expect, how to prevent or treat these side effects.

What is a clinical trial and how do I get more information about that?

A clinical trial is where a patient with a certain diagnosis might be eligible to receive a new chemotherapy or other treatment for their disease. We learn what are the best treatments for patients based on the results of these clinical trials. You can ask your doctor about the availability of clinical trials, and weigh the potential benefits against the benefits of known treatments. Another resource is the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland.

Learning about your cancer, cancer treatments and managing side effects can be overwhelming. A cancer diagnosis affects not only the person with cancer physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well. It also affects the entire family. Write down your questions when you visit your doctor or nurse. There are support groups and counselors that specialize in working with patients with cancer. Ask your doctor or nurse for a referral if you need someone to talk to about your concerns.

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CHEMOTHERAPY

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is medicine that kills rapidly growing cells during a certain period of the "cell cycle." Nearly all cells in the body go through a "cycle" or stages as they grow and divide. "Chemotherapy" targets certain cancer cells because they usually grow more rapidly than normal tissue. Cancer cells seem to be more vulnerable to the effects of cancer chemotherapy compared to healthy tissues.

Chemotherapy can be given in pill form, but most commonly is given by an IV (intravenous).

Why is chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy may be selected to treat certain cancers if that drug or combination of drugs is known to be effective in killing or controlling that type of cancer. Not all cancers are affected by chemotherapy, and not all chemotherapy drugs affect all cancers. Your doctor will tell you which type of treatment or combination of treatments will work best for your type of cancer.

How does chemotherapy work?

Chemotherapy works by combining with parts of the inner workings of the cell (the DNA or RNA) and interrupting the cell's ability to properly divide into two new cells. If the cell can't divide normally, then it will eventually die.

When is it given?

Chemotherapy affects many normal but rapidly growing tissues. Therefore chemotherapy is given in "cycles" or at certain periods of time. This time period in between when chemotherapy is given allows the normal tissues to "recover" or go back to a more normal state, before the next "cycle" is given.

This interval can vary depending on how the chemotherapy drugs affect the normal tissues.

Do you stay in the hospital or can you have therapy at home?

Where the chemotherapy is given depends on which drugs you will receive, and how they will be given. If they are in pill form, you will probably take these at home. If the drugs are given by vein (IV), then it will probably be given in the doctor's office or in a clinic. Sometimes the chemotherapy is given while you are a patient in the hospital.

Can I go on vacation if I'm on chemotherapy?

Talk to your doctor or oncology nurse about your vacation plans. Sometimes you can still travel while on a mild form of "chemo." However, sometimes the chemotherapy will cause you to be vulnerable to catching colds or other infections, and you may feel very tired. It may not be a good idea for you to travel. Your doctor or nurse can help you understand what the risks are for your disease and treatment.

Will I lose my hair and if so, will it grow back?

Some chemotherapy drugs cause complete hair loss, some cause mild hair loss, and others may cause very little hair loss. Ask your oncology (cancer) nurse or your doctor as they will know which chemotherapy drugs you will be receiving.

Yes, your hair will eventually grow back, once you've completed the chemotherapy. It may grow back a different texture or color.

Will it affect my fertility (male and female)?

Chemotherapy will affect rapidly growing cells, and your fertility may be affected. It usually depends on the specific chemotherapy drugs you will be receiving, and your age. Ask your doctor. However, if you are sexually active and in the age group where you could get pregnant, you must use a form of birth control even if your periods temporarily stop.

Do I stay away from people...can I get infections easily?

It just takes some common sense. Avoid

crowds, and ask your family and friends to stay away if they have a cold or other infection. If you have a family with young children, just make sure everyone washes their hands after using the bathroom or if they blow their nose. You are more vulnerable to getting infections while you are on chemotherapy. Again, ask your doctor or oncology nurse as different chemotherapies can have different effects.

Can cancer run in the family?

Yes. There are many causes of cancer, but for many cancers we do not know the cause. In some families, there can be a genetic tendency to get cancer or a certain type of cancer. If you are concerned about this, talk this over with your cancer doctor (oncologist). They can refer you and your family members to a specialist who can advise you as to your family risk for that cancer.

Did I do anything to cause my cancer?

Sometimes we know that certain activities can lead to certain cancers. For example, it is well known that many lung cancers are caused by exposure to years of cigarette smoking. However, there are some types of lung cancer that are not caused by smoking. This is true for many cancers. Overexposure to the sun over many years can lead to certain types of skin cancer. There are other factors in the environment, in the foods that we eat or drink, in the air we breathe, that can make certain people at risk for certain types of cancers.

However, for many other cancers, we still do not know what triggers or causes that particular cancer in that particular person.

How is the chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy is given in different ways depending on the particular type of cancer that you have. Your oncology nurse will explain to you how the medication will be given to you. For example, it might be given through a needle or catheter placed in your vein. It might take a few minutes or several hours or days or weeks to be given.