

Chemotherapy Side Effects

How to Manage

Infection

Throughout your chemotherapy treatment, your health care team monitors your blood counts with routine blood tests. If blood counts are low, you may be more likely to get an infection.

To help prevent infection or disease:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- Avoid crowds and people who you know are sick
- Try not to cut yourself or get breaks in your skin
- Talk with your doctor before you get any vaccines
- Practice good mouth care
- Bathe or shower every day.



Take your temperature as instructed. For a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or greater call your health care team. They can help determine if you need to seek urgent care. If it is an emergency and your call is not answered, go to the nearest hospital emergency center. Your health care team may give you other temperature guidelines.

Fatigue

If you have fatigue be sure to balance rest with activities. Plan your most important activities when you have the most energy. Rest if you need to but try to limit naps to 30 minutes at a time. Exercise can boost your energy level, along with a balanced diet. You can also drink fortified nutrition beverages between meals. If you are so fatigued that you stay in bed more than half the day, be sure to tell your doctor. Fatigue may get worse throughout your chemotherapy treatment.

Nausea and Vomiting

If you have nausea, eat a light, bland meal or snack before you receive chemotherapy. To reduce nausea, eat small, frequent meals throughout the day. Choose dry foods (like toast and crackers) or cold and bland foods that do not have a strong odor. Do not eat high fat, hot or spicy foods. It is also important to drink plenty of fluids. Drink between 64 and 96 ounces of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluids each day.



When you feel nauseous, take your anti-nausea medicine 30 minutes before you eat. This may help you keep your meal down. Tell your health care team if the medicines are not controlling your nausea and vomiting. If you vomit 4 or more times in one day or are unable to keep fluids down, go to the nearest hospital emergency center.

Diarrhea

Diarrhea may vary depending on the type of chemotherapy you receive. Over-the-counter medicines are available to help. If you **do not** have a fever, take loperamide (Imodium®) for diarrhea. Follow the directions on the label. If you **do** have a fever, talk with your health care team before you take Imodium. If you have 4 or more loose bowel movements in one day, call your health care team. If it is after clinic hours, go to the nearest hospital emergency center.



Constipation

For constipation, take a laxative, such as Senna, with or without docusate. Follow the directions on the label. A well-balanced diet with good fiber and fluid intake helps with bowel management. If you take ondansetron (Zofran®) for nausea, it may cause constipation. You can take a laxative when you take Zofran.

If you are constipated and do not have a bowel movement for 3 or more days, call your health care team.

Mouth Care

Start good mouth care right away to help prevent mouth sores. Brush your teeth, gums and tongue after each meal and at bedtime. Be sure to use a soft toothbrush. After you brush, rinse your mouth with a baking soda solution. **Do not** use a mouthwash that has alcohol.

To help prevent or lessen mouth sores, rinse your mouth with a baking soda solution at least 3 times a day. Mix a ½ teaspoon of baking soda with 8 ounces of water. Tell your health care team if mouth sores cause problems when you eat or drink.

Tough foods require a lot of chewing. They may cause your mouth to become tired and irritated. Hard and crunchy foods (such as tortilla chips) may scrape the inside of your mouth, which may cause bleeding. It is best if you choose soft, moist, room temperature and lightly seasoned foods. These are often easy to chew and swallow.

Sexuality

Your sexual health may be affected by chemotherapy treatment. Chemotherapy may affect your ability to have children. If you think you may want to have children in the future, talk with your health care team about fertility before you start chemotherapy.

Most patients can continue sexual activity during chemotherapy. However, chemotherapy may temporarily decrease your sexual desire. You may also experience side effects such as vaginal dryness or hot flashes. Talk with your health care team about this as they may be able to help. Changes in your menstrual cycle can also occur while on chemotherapy. It is important to talk with your health care team about birth control as chemotherapy may cause birth defects. You may still become pregnant even if you do not have a period.

Nerves and Pain

Chemotherapy may cause peripheral neuropathy. This condition is a result of nerve damage which may cause numbness, pain or tingling in your hands, feet, arms or legs. You may feel clumsy or have trouble picking up objects. Be sure to tell your doctor if you have any of these symptoms. Peripheral neuropathy may be reversible if caught early.

Chemo Brain

Chemo brain is a term used to describe changes in memory, attention, concentration or other mental abilities. Chemo brain may result from chemotherapy treatment. Talk with your health care team about ways to manage chemo brain.

Hair Loss

Some chemotherapies cause all body hair to fall out. Other chemotherapies only affect the hair on your head. In general, hair may start to thin or fall out 7 to 21 days after you start chemotherapy. It may start to grow back within a month of finishing chemotherapy.

If you have hair loss, there are many options available to you. You can wear wigs, scarves or hats. It is your decision. You can contact The American Cancer Society to participate in their Look Good, Feel Better program. This program helps patients adjust to changes in their appearance. Talk with your nurse for more information about these resources.

Nails

Your fingernails may become brittle or discolored. They may also lift up from the nail bed. To protect your nails, keep your fingernails short. **Do not** cut your cuticles or get professional manicures or pedicures. Also, wear gloves when you garden or work with your hands. Pay attention to how your nails look. If the skin around them is red or puffy, you may have an infection. Tell your health care team if this happens.

Skin

You may have dry skin. Use an unscented moisturizing cream or lotion. **Do not** use perfumes or scented soaps. You may also sunburn more easily. Use a sunscreen with SPF30 or higher when outdoors, even if you do not normally sunburn. You may notice a change in color in your skin. This usually goes away over time.

Additional Information

This education sheet is a general guideline. For more detailed information, refer to the **Chemotherapy Guide**.



For any urgent issues, go to the nearest hospital emergency center right away. Call 911 if you do not have transportation to the emergency center.

For non-urgent issues, contact your health care team. You can do so with MyChart, the secure patient portal or by phone.

- **Texas Medical Center:** 713-792-2121; press 0 to speak with the operator
- **League City:** 713-563-0670
- **West Houston:** 713-563-9600
- **Sugar Land:** 281-566-1800
- **The Woodlands:** 713-563-0050