



* For patient education only

Patient Education

Chemotherapy: Common Side Effects & Health Education



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What Causes Side Effects?

Chemotherapy is designed to kill fast-growing cancer cells. But it can also affect normal healthy cells that grow fast too. These include blood-forming cells in the bone marrow, hair follicles as well as cells in the mouth, digestive tract and reproductive system.

Will I Get Side Effects from Chemotherapy?

The severity of side effects varies greatly from person to person. This depends on the type and dose of chemotherapy you get and how your body reacts to it. Before you start chemotherapy, talk to your nurse about the side effects you may experience.

How Long Do Side Effects Last?

This depends on your health and the type of chemotherapy you are getting. Most side effects disappear after chemotherapy is over. But sometimes it can take months or even years for them to fully disappear.



Some of the Common Side Effects of Chemotherapy and Useful Tips

1. Lethargy and Tiredness

- Get plenty of rest. Sleep longer at night and take naps during the day
- Do some exercise in between rest time, depending on your own tolerance
- Eat a well balanced diet: Food that are high in calorie and protein
- Drink plenty of water: 1.5 – 2 liters per day



2. Loss of Appetite

- Eat and drink slowly
- Drink plain water at least an hour before or after mealtime
- Eat small and frequent meals or snacks throughout the day instead of heavy meals
- Drink nutritional supplements
- Eat home-cooked food if possible
- Take advantage of 'good' days to increase your food intake



3. Nausea and Vomiting

- To eliminate strong smells, try eating food at room temperature
- Stay away from food that makes you nauseous
- Chew your food well for easier digestion
- Avoid eating before treatment if nausea usually occurs during chemotherapy
- Take a deep breath if you feel nauseous
- Try to suck on mints or ice cubes

4. Decreased Blood Cell Count (Low Immunity and Bleeding)

- Maintain good hygiene, e.g. wash your hands often to avoid infection
- Stay away from people who are sick or stay away from crowds
- Avoid eating raw vegetables or undercooked fish, seafood, meat, chicken or eggs. These may have bacteria that can cause infection
- Observe for bruising or bleeding tendency
- Observe for sign and symptoms of infection, e.g. fever



5. Hair Loss

- Use mild or unperfumed shampoo
- Cut your hair short or shave your head
- Avoid washing hair frequently
- Dab gently with a towel to dry your hair
- Comb your hair gently with a wide-toothed plastic comb
- Avoid excessive heat from heated rollers or hair dryer

6. Mouth Ulcer

- Check your mouth and tongue everyday
- Keep your mouth moist by sucking ice chips or sugar-free candy
- Clean your mouth, teeth, gums and tongue by using a toothbrush with extra soft bristles.
- Choose moist, soft, soothing, and easy to chew or swallow food
- Take small bites of food, chew slowly and sip liquid while you eat
- Avoid food that is spicy, rough, coarse or dry
- Gargle frequently with a non-alcohol mouthwash

7. Skin and Nail Changes

Skin

- Wash with a mild moisturising soap
- Avoid direct sunlight and use sunscreen lotion
- Wear light-coloured pants, long-sleeve cotton shirts and hats with wide brims
- Apply lotion or moisturiser with vitamin E

Nails

- Wear gloves when washing dishes, working in the garden or cleaning the house

How to Manage Side Effects?

Doctors have many ways to prevent or treat chemotherapy side effects and help you heal after each treatment session. Talk to your doctor or nurse about what to expect and how to manage them. Inform your doctor or nurse if you notice any changes on your side effects.

Side effects vary from one person to another,
as it depends on the drugs used.





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