

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING CHEMOTHERAPY



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Cancer and Chemotherapy

Cancer is the rapid, uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells in the body which have the potential to invade surrounding healthy tissue, and spread or *metastasize* to other sites in the body. Chemotherapy, or chemo, is most commonly associated with the use of chemical agents to destroy these rapidly dividing cancer cells. Unlike localized forms of cancer treatment, such as radiation or surgery, chemotherapy eliminates cancer cells throughout the entire body and is often referred to as systemic therapy.

Chemo can be delivered with one drug as a single agent or in combination with other drugs. As well, chemotherapy may be used in conjunction with other treatment modalities such as radiation therapy or surgery. The selection of chemotherapy agents and other treatment modalities to help manage your cancer will be determined by your physician based on the specific goals of your therapy.

How is Chemotherapy Delivered?

Chemotherapy is most often delivered into a vein (intravenous or IV infusion), but it can also be administered with a pill, capsule or liquid by mouth or with an infusion into a specific area of the body. Most treatments, with the exception of oral chemotherapy, will be delivered at the cancer center. While the time varies for each drug delivered, most patients receive their treatments over 2-4 hours.

Because multiple treatments will be given, a physician and a patient may choose to use an IV access device such as a *catheter* or a *port* in order to minimize the number of needle “sticks”. A catheter is a soft, thin, flexible tube, one end of which is placed in a large vein while the other end remains outside the body. A port is a small disc implanted under the skin and attached to a catheter which is inserted into a vein.

Many chemotherapy drugs work best during a specific time in a cell’s growth and division process. Because of this, chemotherapy agents are not generally administered like other medications you may have taken. Instead, each chemotherapy drug is given in a manner designed to eliminate the greatest number of cancer cells at the time of drug delivery. Chemotherapy is usually prescribed with intervals of active drug alternated with resting periods which allow the healthy tissues in the body to recover. The time from the first day of delivery of the drug(s) through the end of the rest period is referred to as a *cycle*. The time off of the drug(s) may last as long as 2-3 weeks. Once a cycle is completed, it will be repeated a number of times as prescribed by your physician. An entire *course* of chemotherapy consists of multiple cycles.

Because you may receive several drugs, each of which may be delivered on a different timetable, your physician and patient care coordinators will help to arrange your schedule so that you know exactly when to come in for your treatments. Drugs work the best when they are taken on schedule, so it is important to try to stay on track and not miss appointments.

How Do I Prepare for Chemotherapy?

Prior to your first chemotherapy appointment and every three to four weeks thereafter, you will be meeting with your physician. If possible, bring someone with you to your physician visits to help you listen to the facts and keep the information in context. Taking notes may also help you remember and understand all of the information and prepare for your treatments.

Prior to starting chemo, bring a list of all medications you are taking to ensure there will be no interactions with your prescribed chemotherapy. Once treatment begins, be certain to tell your physician if you begin taking any new medications, vitamins, or herbal supplements.

For each chemotherapy appointment, you will need to plan to spend approximately 2-4 hours at the center. Wear warm, comfortable clothes, and try to get a lot of rest prior to your appointment. If you are having trouble sleeping, please make sure you tell your treatment team, and an anti-anxiety medication or a mild sedative may be prescribed for you.

Once you arrive, if you do not have a port or a catheter in place, a nurse will start an IV in order to infuse your chemotherapy. Our nurses are the most skilled nurses in the industry, so you should experience minimal discomfort. The chemotherapy will be delivered over the next few hours. Many patients find that they are able to nap through their treatments at the center. Following treatment, you will want to continue to get a lot of rest. If you notice any redness, pain, burning, swelling or discomfort at the injection site after your appointment, please report it immediately.

Meet the Treatment Team

Your care will be handled by a team of experienced oncology specialists dedicated to providing you and your family with the highest quality of care.

The Medical Oncologist/Hematologist is the physician responsible for evaluating your cancer, defining goals for your treatment, and developing an individualized plan for your chemotherapy designed to achieve these goals.

The Nurse Practitioner is a nurse who has specialized training and works alongside the medical oncologist to help oversee treatments, manage side effects, and correspond with you to meet your needs throughout the course of treatment and subsequent follow-up.

The Chemotherapy Nurses are responsible for delivering your chemotherapy. Nurses may also take your vital signs, start IVs, and help with the management of side effects.

What are the Side Effects of Chemotherapy?

The most common side effects associated with chemo stem from the fact that chemotherapy drugs are not able to differentiate between cancer cells and otherwise healthy cells. They target all rapidly dividing cells meaning that in addition to the cancer, they may damage some normal cells including hair follicles, the lining of the gastrointestinal tract, and blood cells. Not all chemotherapies cause all side effects, and some chemotherapies may have side effects that are unique to that particular drug. Please consult your physician to learn more about the side effects that you can anticipate with your drug combination.

Fatigue: You may experience mild to moderate fatigue while undergoing chemotherapy. It is important to get plenty of rest and eat a well balanced diet to maintain your strength.

Hair Loss/Alopecia: While not all chemotherapy leads to hair loss, some drugs will damage the hair follicles causing this side effect. The hair loss usually takes place approximately two weeks after the initiation of chemotherapy and may be accompanied by scalp tenderness. To prepare for this side effect, it may be helpful to get wigs, hats, and/or scarves prior to beginning your treatment. In the majority of cases, hair will re-grow following the completion of treatment and may return with a different texture or color than before.

Nausea/Vomiting/GI Upset: While chemotherapy drugs can potentially cause some nausea and vomiting, today these side effects can generally be managed with medication. Your diet does not contribute to these side effects, therefore it is not necessary to go on a bland diet when you start chemotherapy. In fact, many patients prefer strongly flavored food while they are in treatment.

Blood Related Side Effects/Myelosuppression: Chemotherapies can frequently reduce the number of blood cells in your body. This can add to your fatigue and can also make you more susceptible to bleeding and infection. Your physician will schedule regular blood draws to closely monitor your blood counts. Today, there are several drugs which have been developed to help compensate for the loss in blood cells. It is important while you are undergoing chemotherapy to avoid people who are sick and might be contagious.

Mouth or Throat Sores/Mucositis: Sometimes chemotherapy can cause damage to the mucosal membranes that line the upper digestive tract. This can cause sores in the mouth and throat. Use a soft toothbrush and avoid mouthwash containing alcohol to avoid further irritation of the tissues. As well, there are treatments available to help manage this side effect.

When Should I Call My Doctor About a Side Effect?

If you experience any fever, pain or any side effect that scares you, please call us immediately day or night. You will be connected with a member of your treatment team who knows the details of your case and can further direct you.

Do I Need to Quit Work?

No. It is important while you are having chemotherapy to behave as normally as possible. You may experience mild to moderate fatigue, but many patients are able to work throughout their treatments. We will work to accommodate your job schedule when setting up your appointments.

How Will I Know if My Therapy is Working?

Your physician will schedule lab and imaging tests such as CT and PET/CT to evaluate your response to therapy. It is important to know that side effects are not correlated with a response to therapy.

What Happens After I Am Finished with Therapy?

After treatment you will return for regular visits and will undergo further surveillance with physical exams, lab tests, and imaging to make sure the treatment was successful and monitor you for recurrence.

Will My Insurance Cover Chemotherapy?

We accept most insurance plans the majority of which offer chemotherapy benefits. If you have any questions regarding your insurance carrier, **please contact our patient insurance specialist.** Please do not allow finances to deter you from undergoing the treatment that you need. We are committed to helping you and your family have full access to all cancer services.

If you are experiencing a side effect or if you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, please call our office.



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