

Understanding chemotherapy

Information for patients



What is chemotherapy?

It is a way of treating cancer using drugs.

These anticancer drugs kill or damage cancer cells. They also affect some healthy cells which can cause side effects.

The most common ways to give chemotherapy are:

- through a drip into a vein
- by mouth as tablets or capsules
- by injection under the skin or into a muscle.

Is all chemotherapy the same?

No. There are many different drugs used for chemotherapy. Researchers test which drugs work best for different cancers.

The best research evidence available is used to develop chemotherapy plans. These are used by the doctors and other health professionals who give chemotherapy.

Each plan has detailed information about:

- the patients it is suitable for
- the drugs to use
- when to give them
- how to give them
- how much to give
- any tests needed
- possible side effects, and how to manage these.

For more information about chemotherapy plans, go to eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers

Does everyone get the same amount?

No. Different people need different amounts of chemotherapy.

The chemotherapy plan shows how to work this out. It can be based on the person's weight or height, or how well their kidneys or liver are working.

Some chemotherapy plans recommend a lower amount for people who are older or have other health problems.

Your doctor will explain if you need any changes to the amount of chemotherapy.

Who decides if I need chemotherapy?

Your doctor works with a team with other doctors, nurses and health professionals. This is called a **multidisciplinary team** (or **MDT**).



The team works out the best treatment for you. It can include chemotherapy, surgery, radiotherapy, or a combination of these treatments.

Your doctor will explain how each treatment could help you, and any side effects you could get.

Which chemotherapy do I need?

The best chemotherapy for you depends on:

- the type of cancer you have
- whether the cancer has spread
- the aim of your treatment (to cure the cancer or control it)
- your general health.

Your doctor will use a chemotherapy plan that suits your situation.





Can my chemotherapy be changed?

Your doctor will see you regularly during chemotherapy. If you get severe side effects, your doctor may make some changes.

Changes can include:

- delaying the next treatment to give your body longer to recover
- reducing the amount of chemotherapy to control side effects.

Sometimes, your doctor may recommend changing to a different treatment. This can happen if you have severe side effects, or if the chemotherapy isn't working as well as expected.

Ask your doctor to discuss any changes with you, and explain why they are needed.

Useful words

- **Chemotherapy:** Treating cancer using drugs.
- **Chemotherapy protocol:** The plan used to give chemotherapy.
- **Dose:** The amount of a drug given.
- **Dose reduction:** When the amount of chemotherapy is reduced.
- **Drugs:** Medicines.
- **Multidisciplinary team (MDT):** A team of doctors, nurses and other health professionals.
- **Side effects:** Unwanted effects from a drug (e.g. losing your hair).
- **Treatment delay:** When the next treatment is delayed to allow the body longer to recover.

Talking to your doctor

Using an interpreter

Professional interpreters are available if you need help understanding or speaking English.

You can have a family member or friend with you, but you should use the interpreter to talk to the doctor about your treatment.

- It is your right to ask for an interpreter.
- When you make your appointment, say that you need an interpreter.
- Interpreter services are free and confidential.
- The Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS) has interpreters available by telephone on 13 14 50.

Things to ask your doctor

It is important for you and your family to ask questions and be involved in making decisions about your treatment. For example:

- What chemotherapy am I having?
- What is the aim of my chemotherapy?
- What side effects could I get?
- Is my treatment based on a chemotherapy plan?
- Are my doses the same as the ones in the plan?
- Have any changes been made, and how could these affect me?
- Who should I contact if I have any questions or concerns?
- Is there anything I should do to prepare for chemotherapy?
- How will we know if it is working?
- If chemotherapy doesn't work, are there other treatments I can have?

For more questions, visit cancerinstitute.org.au/how-we-help/reports-and-publications/question-lists-for-people-with-cancer