

# Managing the side effects of anti-cancer medicines

There are many different anti-cancer medications with varying side effects. The severity or duration of your side effects can depend on the type, length and amount of treatment you receive.

This information sheet outlines some of the most common side effects of anti-cancer medications.

Before you start treatment, a health professional will talk with you about your specific treatment. You should receive printed information explaining:

- how to recognise possible side effects of the treatment
- how to prevent or manage side effects at home
- when to contact your treating team or when to attend hospital
- symptoms that require immediate medical attention.

Your doctor may prescribe other medications to help with your side effects. You might like to keep a diary to record your side effects and share this with your doctor or nurse.

## Urgent side effects

Some side effects of anti-cancer medication can be very serious. It is important not to wait to seek assistance.

Contact your treating team or go to your nearest emergency department immediately if you have any of these symptoms:

- chest pain
- a temperature of 38°C or higher
- chills, shivers or shakes
- gum or nose bleeds or unusual bleeding (if bleeding doesn't stop after ten minutes of ice and pressure)
- pain, burning or blood in your urine
- vomiting (that continues despite taking anti-sickness medication)
- diarrhoea (e.g. four or more bowel movements than usual and/or diarrhoea at night)
- difficulty breathing

## Fatigue

Most patients undergoing cancer treatment will experience fatigue, which may continue even after their treatment is completed. Fatigue can be debilitating and affect your concentration, mood and everyday life if it is not managed correctly.

### Things you can do:

- Set daily priorities (energy conservation).
- Take regular breaks or small naps.
- Try relaxation techniques (music, meditation and yoga).
- Exercise regularly. Consider seeing an exercise physiologist or physiotherapist.
- Maintain a well-balanced diet and stay hydrated.
- Monitor and record your fatigue, the duration, frequency and severity and report any concerns to your treating team.

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## Neutropenia and infection

Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell that help to fight infections or germs. Anti-cancer medicines can cause the neutrophil count in your blood to decrease. This is known as neutropenia. When neutropenia occurs, you have less ability to fight infections.

If you develop a fever (temperature of 38°C or above) or feel unwell, it is very important to seek immediate medical attention. It could be life-threatening and should be taken very seriously.

Contact your treating team or go to your nearest emergency department immediately if you develop any of the following symptoms:

- a temperature of 38°C or higher
- chills, shivers or shakes
- pain, redness, heat, swelling or drainage from a wound/around a venous access device
- pain, burning or blood in your urine
- diarrhoea, four or more bowel movements than usual within 24 hours and/or diarrhoea at night
- sore throat (with fever)
- cough (with fever)

### Preventing infection

Some ways you can reduce your exposure to bacteria and viruses while you have low neutrophils (white blood cells) are:

- Care for your venous access devices (e.g. PICCs, ports, TIVADs or tc-CICC lines) as directed.
- Avoid crowded places (e.g. buses, cinemas).
- Try to avoid close contact with people who have coughs and colds or those who have been in contact with infectious diseases, such as shingles, chickenpox or measles.
- Stay away from construction and building sites where there is a lot of dust.
- Always wash your hands with soap and water before preparing food, eating, and after using the bathroom or sneezing, etc.
- Shower daily.
- Maintain good skin care and try to prevent injuries, as broken skin provides an entry point for bacteria (i.e. avoid using a razor or squeezing pimples).
- Clean cuts, scrapes, sores and/or stings immediately with warm water, soap and antiseptic.
- Avoid rectal suppositories or enemas. If you are constipated, speak to your treating team about the best way to manage this.
- Avoid nail and beauty salons, saunas and hot tubs. Speak to your treating team before engaging in these activities.

- Speak to your treating team before you have any dental treatment. Let your dentist know you are receiving anti-cancer therapy.
- Effective mouth care is important in preventing dental cavities and infection. Brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush. Rinse your mouth after eating and smoking and before bedtime using:
  - 1/4 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in 1 cup of warm water, or
  - 1/4 teaspoon salt in 1 cup of warm water or
  - alcohol-free mouthwash.
- Check with your doctor before you receive any immunisations or vaccinations.
- Wear protective gloves and closed footwear when working outside and avoid contact with soil and potting mix.
- Avoid handling pet poo or cleaning fish tanks.

### Food safety

As your body may be less able to fight infections, it is important to ensure that the foods you eat are safe. To help reduce your risk of contracting foodborne illnesses and infections:

- Wash your hands with soap and water before eating and after handling food.
- Clean chopping boards and kitchen counters thoroughly.
- Store food out of the “danger zone” – germs grow more rapidly when food is kept between 5°C and 60°C.
- Eat foods that are cooked through.
- Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator (do not leave to thaw at room temperature).
- Thoroughly wash fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Wash utensils, knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- Avoid pre-made food such as sandwiches and buffet-style food. Only buy takeaway food if it is cooked fresh and is hot (over 60°C). Either eat or refrigerate it as soon as possible and eat it all within 24 hours.
- Avoid eating shellfish, raw or precooked prawns, oysters, sushi, pate, raw meat and deli meats.
- Avoid eating soft cheeses, such as feta, brie, camembert and blue vein.
- Avoid reheating food; however, if food does need to be reheated, it should be heated until it is hot throughout (over 60°C) and eaten within 24 hours.

If your ability to fight infection is severely affected, your treating team may ask you to follow stricter guidelines than those above.

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## Anti-cancer therapy-induced nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting are among the most common and distressing side effects of anti-cancer medicines. Your doctor may prescribe anti-sickness medications to help prevent these symptoms. Some are given before the treatment, and some you will take home with you.

You should take these anti-sickness medications regularly as prescribed, even if you are not feeling sick. It is better to stop nausea and vomiting before it starts.

Please tell your doctor or nurse if you still experience nausea or vomiting after taking these medications. There may be other, more effective medications you can try. Reporting problems to your treating team early may reduce the chance of having to go to hospital.

As well as medications, you may find tips helpful to manage nausea and/or vomiting:

- Avoid eating or preparing food when feeling sick. If possible, let someone else prepare meals.
- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks instead of three large meals a day, as these may be easier to digest.
- Eat and drink slowly and chew your food well.
- Avoid overly sweet, fried, fatty or spicy foods and foods with a strong smell. If the smell of hot food makes you feel sick, try eating cold foods.
- Ginger and/or peppermint may help with nausea. Try ginger biscuits, ginger beer, or peppermints/peppermint tea.
- Avoid drinking too much before a meal.
- Avoid alcohol and excess amounts of coffee.
- Some people find travel sickness bands effective in reducing nausea.

## Infertility

Some anti-cancer medicines can cause infertility. Your doctor will discuss this with you before you start your treatment and will provide you with more information on preserving your fertility.

## Sex and intimacy

The treatment or its side effects may affect your desire or ability to have sex. Loss of libido (sex drive) is not uncommon in patients receiving treatment. Remember, everyone experiences side effects differently. It is important to consider other ways to maintain intimacy.

This may continue for a while after treatment is finished but usually resolves with time. It may help to discuss your concerns with your partner and/or doctor/nurse.

For more information about safety during sex, see the [‘Chemotherapy Safety at Home’](#) patient information sheet.

## Mouth care

It is common to experience a sore or dry mouth and throat during anti-cancer treatment. Soreness and ulceration of the mouth lining is known as mucositis or stomatitis and can be very painful. Damage to the lining of the mouth is usually temporary. Most side effects will disappear once you finish treatment and your white blood cell count returns to normal.

The likelihood of developing a sore mouth varies. Your treating team will tell you how likely this is with your type of treatment. The risk is higher for people who receive anti-cancer medicines as well as radiation therapy to the head and neck area.

There is a lot you can do to help keep your mouth healthy. Look in your mouth each day for any signs of redness, swelling, sores, white patches or bleeding. Your nurse or healthcare worker at the hospital can show you how to do this.

As symptoms can progress quickly, it is important to tell your doctor or nurse if you have:

- trouble eating or swallowing
- painful spots or sores in your mouth
- sores on your lips.

Measures such as regular mouth care, close monitoring and early intervention can help to reduce this side effect. Self-care measures include:

- seeing a dentist before starting treatment, if possible, to reduce risk factors, e.g. ill-fitting dentures, broken teeth
- regular mouth care after eating, smoking and before bed, using a soft toothbrush, a mild, fluoride-containing toothpaste and alcohol-free mouthwash
- keeping lips lubricated, e.g., with lip balm or lip cream, but avoid using lip balms or creams that are hydrophobic or water-repelling (e.g., have a high content of paraffin or petroleum jelly)
- maintaining your fluid intake (aim to drink eight glasses of clear fluids per day, or more if you can)
- eating soft, minced or pureed foods
- adding extra sauces or gravies to moisten meals
- avoiding foods that are acidic, hot, coarse/hard, salty or spicy
- consuming small, frequent, high protein, high energy meals
- stopping smoking
- avoiding alcohol

## Treatment-induced diarrhoea

At times you may have very loose or liquid stools (diarrhoea). It is important to seek medical attention if you have uncontrolled or worsening diarrhoea. If left untreated, diarrhoea can result in dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, weakness, weight loss, skin soreness and poor nutrition.

### You can help yourself by:

- aiming to drink eight glasses of clear fluids a day (e.g. water, sports drinks, clear juices or broth), or more if you can manage it - try carrying a water bottle and sipping throughout the day
- avoiding caffeinated drinks and alcohol
- avoiding fizzy drinks and natural fruit juices
- limiting rich, fatty/greasy and spicy foods
- limiting raw vegetables and fruits
- eating small, frequent, bland, low-fibre meals (e.g. bananas, rice, noodles, white bread, skinless chicken or white fish)
- limiting dairy products
- ensuring the area around the anus is kept clean by regularly washing with lukewarm water and ensuring the area is dry afterwards to prevent skin irritation
- applying barrier cream (e.g. Bepanthen® or Sudocrem®) if your skin becomes irritated
- washing your hands after using the toilet.

### Please contact your treating team, if you are experiencing diarrhoea with any of these symptoms:

- passing little or no urine
- rapid heart rate
- headaches
- dizziness
- confusion
- flushed, dry skin
- coated tongue
- severe abdominal/rectal pain

### Contact your treating team or go to your nearest emergency department immediately, if you are experiencing diarrhoea and:

- have recently been treated with the medication irinotecan (commonly used in colorectal cancer) or an immunotherapy
- have a temperature over 38°C
- have bloody or black stool.

## Peripheral neuropathy

Some anti-cancer medications can affect nerve endings. This is called peripheral neuropathy. Certain types of anti-cancer medicines are more likely to cause this condition, and your treating team will advise you if the therapy you are on increases your risk.

It can cause sensations like tingling, burning, numbness or pins and needles in the hands and/or feet. You may experience difficulties with your fine motor skills (e.g. buttoning a shirt, tying your shoelaces, gripping a pen).

Symptoms of peripheral neuropathy can begin any time after you start treatment and may worsen as your treatment continues.

Tell your doctor or nurse if you get any of these sensations so they can be monitored. If necessary, changes can be made to the dose or the type of anti-cancer medication you receiving. If the symptoms become severe and are not treated, the nerves could be damaged permanently. These symptoms usually get better after your treatment ends, although it may take some time.

### Some practical tips if you develop peripheral neuropathy:

- Keep your rooms uncluttered and well-lit, so you can see where you are going and avoid any obstacles
- Make sure any rugs on the floor, especially in the bathroom, have non-slip backing.
- Avoid slippery, wet floors, and wipe liquids immediately.
- Use portable over-the-tub handgrips or install shower grips.
- Adjust the water temperature to avoid burns and test your bath or washing water with your elbow rather than your hands.
- Use rubber gloves around the kitchen and potholders and oven mitts to handle hot or cold items.
- Hold hot mugs by the handle, not the cup.
- Shield your fingers when cutting foods and take care opening jars.
- Wear rubber gloves and shoes or boots, when working in the garage or garden.
- If affected, avoid driving or operating machinery.
- Wear gloves and warm socks in cold weather.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol.

For more information visit [www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers](http://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers)

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