

Common questions about chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment that uses medicines to destroy cancer cells in the body. This sheet answers some common questions about chemotherapy. For more information, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Is all chemotherapy the same?

No. There are many different types of chemotherapy medicines. You may have one of these or a combination of several medicines.

Your doctor will discuss the best chemotherapy for you and choose a treatment plan that covers:

- the medicine or medicines you will have
- how much you will have (the dose)
- how it will be given
- how often you will have treatment
- any other treatment you will need
- how long you will have chemotherapy for.

How is chemotherapy given?

Common ways to have chemotherapy are:

- **oral** – by mouth as tablets, capsules or liquid medicine
- **intravenous or IV** – straight into the bloodstream through a drip or pump
- **subcutaneous** – by injection (needle) just under the skin
- **intramuscular** – by injection (needle) into a muscle.

There are other less common ways too. Your doctor will explain which method is right for you.

Contact numbers

Remember, talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions about your treatment.

Daytime: _____

Night/weekend: _____

Are other types of treatment given with chemotherapy?

Some people have other types of treatment as well as chemotherapy. You might have:

- surgery
- radiation therapy
- targeted therapy
- immunotherapy
- hormonal therapy
- or a mix of these.

Your doctor or nurse will explain the order and timing of your treatments and tell you if you need to take any other medications alongside your chemotherapy.

What is chemotherapy like?

Having treatment is different for everyone. How you feel will depend on many things, including:

- the type of cancer you have
- your chemotherapy medicines
- if you have other treatments
- whether you have other health problems.

Some people have chemotherapy treatment in hospital, while others have chemotherapy at home. However, many people carry on with normal life during treatment. They go to work, continue normal activities and enjoy time with family and friends.

Can I exercise?

Yes! It's important to keep exercising before, during and after treatment. Being active can help with treatment side effects and is also good for your mood.

You need to take care what exercise you choose and that it suits how you are feeling. Your doctor or nurse can help you find a physiotherapist or an exercise physiologist who works with people with cancer and can advise you on what exercise is suitable.

Will I get side effects?

Most people get some side effects from chemotherapy treatment. This is because chemotherapy works can damage normal healthy cells as well as cancer cells.

Not everyone will get the same side effects. They depend on which chemotherapy medicines you are given. Your doctor or nurse will tell you about likely side effects from your treatment.

One of the most important side effects of chemotherapy is an increased risk of infection. It is important to know how to reduce this risk and recognise the signs of infection. You can learn about this in our Infection during cancer treatment information sheet.

There is a lot that can be done to help with side effects. Tell your doctor or nurse as soon as they happen, so they can help you.

If you feel tired or sick

- Rest when you feel tired.
- Make time to relax.
- Try to drink lots of fluids.
- If you feel sick in the stomach speak to your doctor or nurse. You can find out more in our Nausea and vomiting during cancer treatment patient information sheet.

If you feel emotional or are not coping well

- This can be a normal feeling for a lot of people, so don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Talk to someone about how you feel.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about what you can do and how to get extra support.

Will I lose my hair?

Some types of chemotherapy can cause hair loss. You may lose the hair on your head and anywhere else on your body. Some people lose all their hair and others have patchy hair loss or thinning. Your doctor or nurse will tell you whether you are likely to lose your hair.

Is my chemotherapy dangerous to others?

During treatment you can have normal contact with other people. You can hug and kiss your family and be around children and pregnant people.

There are a few things you should know about safety and body fluids. After each treatment, chemotherapy can stay in your body for between 48 hours and seven days, depending on the chemotherapy medicine you are given. During that time, small amounts of chemotherapy can be in body fluids like urine (wee), faeces (poo), mucous (phlegm), saliva (spit), vomit, semen and vaginal fluid, so you need to take some extra precautions at home. You can find out more in our Chemotherapy safety at home patient information sheet.

Anyone who is pregnant or breastfeeding should not touch your chemotherapy medicines or clean up or touch your body fluids that might contain chemotherapy.

Am I safe to breastfeed?

People having chemotherapy should not breastfeed.

What about sex, intimacy and fertility?

Intimacy

You may feel differently about physical or emotional intimacy during chemotherapy treatment. This might be hard for you and your partner. Intimacy and sex are different for everyone, so if you are concerned about any changes, talk about them with your partner and with your cancer treatment team.

Contraception

Chemotherapy can harm an unborn baby. It is important to use contraception if there is any chance you or your partner could get pregnant. You should also use a condom, dental dam or other physical barrier if you have any type of sex after each treatment.

Pregnancy

If you think you may be pregnant tell your doctor or nurse right away.

Fertility

Some chemotherapy can affect fertility. If you plan to have children in the future, get advice about this before you start treatment.

Your doctor or nurse will be happy to talk to you (and your partner) about sex, contraception and fertility.

Can I take other medicines?

Other medicines can include:

- medicines your doctor prescribes for you
- medicines you buy over the counter, such as pain killers, anti-inflammatories, or cold and flu tablets
- complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs), like herbs and vitamins
- substances taken for recreational use

Important

- Don't stop or start any medicines without talking to your doctor first.
- Before you start treatment, make sure you tell your doctor about all your medicines.
- It can help to bring your medicines so your doctor can see the packaging and dose.

Complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs)

Sometimes people with cancer want to try other treatments to support their body and help with side effects.

These CAMs can include:

- vitamins and minerals
- herbal teas
- dietary supplements
- homeopathy
- traditional medicines, like Chinese, Ayurvedic or Aboriginal bush medicine.

Some CAMs can interfere with your chemotherapy. They can make your treatment less effective, or they can make it more potent (stronger), which is unsafe.

It's very important to talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about any CAMs you're taking or would like to try. They will check if they are safe for you.

What about vaccinations?

Vaccinations during and after chemotherapy People with cancer and who are having treatment can have weaker immune systems. This means you might have a higher risk of getting infections, or they may be more severe. Vaccinations can help to prevent infections or reduce how severe they can be.

Some vaccinations are safe to have during chemotherapy, and others are not.

Generally:

- **influenza (flu)** vaccine is likely to be safe for you
- **COVID-19** vaccine is recommended for people with cancer or having cancer treatment, but confirm with your doctor first.

Always ask your doctor before you decide to have any vaccinations. Your family members should have vaccinations as usual during your treatment.

Quitting smoking

If you smoke, there are many benefits to quitting even after a cancer diagnosis. Research shows that people who don't smoke have better results with treatment.

The following resources provide information and support to help you quit smoking. Talk to your treating team about any other questions you may have.

- **Call Quitline** on 13 QUIT (13 78 48)
- **iCanQuit** – [iCanQuit.com.au](https://www.icanquit.com.au)
- **Patient Information** – [cancer.nsw.gov.au/general-cancer-information/cancer-support/coping-with-cancer/physical-wellbeing/quitting-smoking](https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/general-cancer-information/cancer-support/coping-with-cancer/physical-wellbeing/quitting-smoking)
- **Quitnow** – [quitnow.gov.au](https://www.quitnow.gov.au)

Can I eat and drink normally?

- Try to eat a healthy diet including fruit and vegetables.
- Drink enough water – about 8 cups or 2 litres a day (unless your doctor tells you to drink less).
- You can drink tea or coffee.
- Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist whether it is safe to drink alcohol during your treatment.

Food safety

Some foods can carry germs that cause infections. You need to know:

- what food is safe to eat during your treatment
- how to prepare and cook your food properly.

Make sure you wash your hands before and after preparing food.

Fresh fruit and vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wash well with running water before eating
Chicken and meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cook well• Put leftovers in the fridge right away and eat within a day (24 hours)• Avoid eating deli meats
Seafood	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only eat well-cooked seafood• Don't eat raw seafood like sashimi or raw prawns
Cheese	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only eat hard cheese like cheddar or processed cheese like cottage cheese• Avoid soft, semi-soft (brie, camembert, ricotta, fetta) and blue cheese
Takeaway foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid pre-cooked items (e.g. hot food in bain-maries)• Choose food that is prepared when you order it

For information for patient and carers scan the QR code



Eating and side effects

Some chemotherapy side effects can make eating and drinking difficult. You may have:

- changes to taste and smell
- a sore or dry mouth or throat
- ulcers in your mouth
- chewing and swallowing problems
- heartburn (indigestion)
- loss of appetite
- nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting
- diarrhoea (runny or watery poo) or constipation (hard or dry poo that is difficult to pass)
- weight loss because of any of these problems.

If you notice any of these changes, tell your doctor or nurse so they can help you manage them. They may also refer you to see a dietitian (a specialist who gives food advice).

Useful tips

Getting help and support

- ✓ Know how to contact your doctor, nurse or the hospital, for help and advice.
- ✓ Find out where to get advice about practical issues, like money problems.
- ✓ Find out where to get support if you are feeling anxious or depressed.
- ✓ Ask where to get extra support e.g. if you live alone or travel for your treatment.

Chemotherapy and infection

- ✓ Learn how to reduce your risk of infection.
- ✓ Call your doctor or nurse immediately if your temperature is 38°C or more

Safety

- ✓ Find out how to be safe at home during your treatment

Treatment side effects

- ✓ Ask about any side effects you might get and how to manage them

T: (02) 8374 5600
E: feedback@eviq.org.au
W: eviq.org.au