

Understanding chemotherapy

Information for patients

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment that uses medicines to destroy cancer cells in the body. Sometimes chemotherapy is called *chemo* or *anti-cancer medicine*.

These anti-cancer medicines work to kill or damage cancer cells. They also affect some healthy cells, which can cause side effects.

The most common ways to give 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.

Who decides if I need chemotherapy?

You will see a specialist cancer doctor who works in a team with other doctors, nurses and health professionals. This is called a *multidisciplinary team* or *MDT*.

The MDT works out the best treatment for you. You may have chemotherapy on its own or with other therapies (e.g. chemotherapy plus radiation therapy).

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

Is all chemotherapy the same?

No. There are many different chemotherapy medicines. They don't all work the same way.

Doctors use different types of chemotherapy for different types of cancers. Sometimes people with the same cancer might be treated with different chemotherapy medicines.

Which chemotherapy do I need?

The best chemotherapy for you depends on:

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

Your doctor will recommend a treatment plan that suits your situation.

Before you start treatment, you might like to make an appointment with your GP to discuss the treatment plan chosen for you.

Does everyone get the same amount?

Not always. Different people need different amounts (doses) of chemotherapy.

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

Some treatment 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.

Do you need an interpreter?

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

What's a treatment plan?

The best research evidence available is used to develop treatment plans (you might hear the terms *treatment protocols* or *treatment schedules*).

Treatment plans are used by doctors and other health professionals who give chemotherapy.

Each plan has detailed information about:

- the cancer it is suitable for
- the medicines to use
- when to give them
- how to give them
- how much to give
- any tests needed
- possible side effects and how to manage them.

Where will I have my chemotherapy treatment?

Some people will have chemotherapy treatment in hospital, while others have treatment at home. Where you have chemotherapy depends on what type of cancer you have and your treatment plan.

Can my chemotherapy be changed?

Your doctor, nurse and pharmacist will ask you about side effects throughout your treatment. If you get severe side effects, your doctor may make some changes. It's important you tell your doctor or nurse about any symptoms you have.

Changes to your chemotherapy can include:

- delaying the next treatment to give your body longer to recover
- reducing the amount of chemotherapy to control side effects.
- adding in extra medicines that might be suitable to help relieve your 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.

How long will I need chemotherapy for?

This will depend on the type of cancer you have, what chemotherapy medicine is being used to treat your cancer and if you have any side effects.

Your doctor will explain to you how long they expect you will need chemotherapy for and talk to you about your treatment plan.

Useful words

- **Side effects:** Unwanted effects from a medicine (e.g. losing your hair)
- **Treatment delay:** When the next treatment is delayed, allowing the body longer to recover
- **Dose reduction:** when the amount of chemotherapy medicine given is reduced

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 treatment?
- What side effects could I get?
- Is my chemotherapy part of a treatment plan?
- Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns?
- Is there anything I should do to prepare for chemotherapy?
- Is there anything I should do while I am having chemotherapy?
- How will we know if it is working?
- If my treatment doesn't work, are there other treatments I can have?
- How often should I see my GP during my treatment?



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.