

ASCO ANSWERS

UNDERSTANDING CHEMOTHERAPY

WHAT IS CHEMOTHERAPY?

Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to kill cancer cells; it travels through the bloodstream to reach cancer cells throughout the body. Chemotherapy is often used after surgery and/or radiation therapy to destroy any remaining cancer cells and lower the risk of recurrence. It may also be used to shrink a tumor before surgical removal or to treat metastatic or recurrent cancer. If it is not possible to get rid of the cancer, chemotherapy may be used to slow cancer growth or reduce symptoms (called palliative therapy).

More than 100 drugs are available to treat cancer. Often doctors will combine the drugs so they are more effective. The drug or combination of drugs, as well as the dose, depends on several factors, including the type and stage of cancer, the patient's overall health, age, and previous cancer treatments. Chemotherapy can be given several ways; the most common method is intravenous (IV) chemotherapy. Find additional information at www.cancer.net/chemotherapy.



Find additional cancer information at www.cancer.net.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT DURING CHEMOTHERAPY?

Before treatment, you will meet with a medical oncologist who will recommend a specific treatment regimen (schedule) and explain the risks and benefits. If you choose to receive chemotherapy, you will be asked to give written permission and undergo tests to plan the treatment. The doctor may also recommend addressing dental health, heart health, and fertility concerns before treatment.

You may receive chemotherapy at the doctor's office, an outpatient clinic, the hospital, or at home. Most chemotherapy is given intermittently (for example, once a week) with time in between doses for recovery. Treatment periods are called cycles (usually three or four weeks). Several of these cycles complete a course of chemotherapy, which generally lasts three months or longer. A treatment session may take minutes, hours, or, in some cases, days. Many people receiving intravenous chemotherapy have a port (a small device that eliminates the need to find a vein at each treatment session) implanted under the skin.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY?

Different drugs cause different side effects; each person's experience depends on the type and location of cancer, treatment dose, and overall health.

Preventing and controlling side effects is a major focus of your health care team, so talk with them about any side effects you experience. The most common side effect is fatigue (lack of energy). Other side effects may include lowering of blood counts (raising the risk of infection and bleeding), throat and mouth sores, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, pain, and constipation. Some drugs may cause nerve damage, appetite loss, hair loss, changes in thinking and memory, and sexual and fertility issues. Most side effects go away after treatment, although some long-term side effects may occur months or even years after treatment. These can include permanent damage to some organs; difficulty with thinking, concentrating, and memory; and nervous system changes. Learn more about managing side effects at www.cancer.net/sideeffects.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What is the type and stage of my cancer? What does this mean?
- Do I need chemotherapy? If so, which drug or drugs will I receive? How will the drug or drugs be given?
- What is the goal of chemotherapy?
- How often will I receive chemotherapy?
- How much time will each treatment take?
- Where will treatment be given?
- Will each treatment be the same? Does the drug or drug dose change throughout the course of treatment?
- What can I do to get ready for this treatment?
- Will you describe what I will experience when I receive chemotherapy? Will it hurt or cause me discomfort during the treatment?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?



Watch a
video about
chemotherapy
side effects

- What are the potential side effects of this treatment? What can be done to ease any side effects?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What are the possible long-term effects of this treatment?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Cancer.Net™

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

The ideas and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) or The Conquer Cancer Foundation. The information in this fact sheet is not intended as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed health care provider. Patients with health care-related questions should call or see their physician or other health care provider promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information encountered here. The mention of any product, service, or treatment in this fact sheet should not be construed as an ASCO endorsement. ASCO is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of or related to any use of ASCO's patient education materials, or to any errors or omissions.

For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, www.cancer.net, or call 888-651-3038.

TERMS TO KNOW

Adjuvant treatment:

Treatment (usually chemotherapy) given to lower risk of recurrence after surgical removal of cancer

Fertility:

The ability to become pregnant or father a child

Intraperitoneal chemotherapy:

Medication given directly into the abdominal cavity

Intravenous chemotherapy:

Medication given directly into a vein

Medical oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer with medication

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

Neoadjuvant therapy:

Treatment (usually chemotherapy) given to shrink a tumor before surgical removal

Oncology nurse:

A member of the treatment team who specializes in caring for cancer patients, including giving chemotherapy

Oral chemotherapy:

Medication swallowed as a pill, capsule, or liquid

Recurrence:

Cancer that comes back after treatment

Topical chemotherapy:

Medication rubbed into the skin