

Oral Chemotherapy



■ What is oral chemotherapy?

Oral chemotherapy is cancer treatment you take at home by mouth, in pills or a liquid. When you think about chemotherapy, or “chemo,” you might think of getting it directly into a vein. This is done in a clinic or hospital. Many drugs only work this way. But other drugs work just as well, or even better, if you take them by mouth. Some other cancer treatments, such as hormonal therapy or targeted therapy, are also given as pills or liquid. These are different from oral chemotherapy. Be sure to ask your health care team what type of medicine you have.

■ How do I handle oral chemotherapy?

Handling and storing oral chemotherapy safely is very important, because these are very strong medicines. They can make children and pets very sick or even cause death. Also, people who are pregnant should avoid handling these medicines or cleaning up after a person taking them. Wash your hands with soap and water before and after you take oral chemotherapy. Leave all pills or capsules in 1 piece. Do not break, split, or crush this type of medicine. Keep these medicines away from places where you handle food. Ask your nurse or doctor how to handle your medicine. For example, you might wear gloves to avoid touching the pill.

■ Is oral chemotherapy as strong as other types of chemotherapy?

Yes. Chemotherapy given as a pill or liquid is just as strong and effective as other types of chemotherapy.

■ How do I store oral chemotherapy?

Keep any oral chemotherapy in its original container, separate from other medicines. If you use a pill organizer, use a separate one for chemo. Store your chemo at room temperature, away from heat, moisture, and direct sun unless other instructions are given. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you should keep any medicines in the refrigerator. If so, be sure children cannot reach them.

■ How do I clean up oral chemotherapy and wastes?

You or anyone else who cleans up body waste should wear disposable gloves. This includes cleaning areas where body waste goes, such as the bathroom. You or another adult should clean the area if you drop a pill or spill any liquid medicine. Wear disposable gloves when you do this. Avoid touching your vomit, urine, or bowel movement waste while you are taking oral chemotherapy. If you get some on your skin, wash it off with soap and water. You can use the same toilet as other people who live with you. Ask your health care team if you should flush twice after using the toilet. Wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet. Wash sweat off your skin. Also wash your bedsheets, towels, and clothing separately from other laundry. The person doing laundry should wear disposable gloves.

■ Who should avoid being around oral chemotherapy?

People who are pregnant should not touch oral chemotherapy. They should also avoid touching body waste and laundry from a person taking this type of medicine. Children and pets should not be near oral chemotherapy. Healthy people should avoid touching the medicines and wear gloves to clean up waste or spills.

■ What if I have extra medicine?

Take any extra medicine back to your pharmacy or doctor’s office. Avoid putting it in the trash, sink, or toilet.

■ What if I miss a dose of my oral chemotherapy?

If you have a written chemo plan, check it and follow the instructions. If you do not have a written plan, call your health care team right away to get one. If you take 1 dose a day and miss it or throw it up, skip that day. Take your regular dose the next day. Do not try to “make up” the lost dose by taking a double dose the next day, unless your doctor tells you to.

■ What if oral chemotherapy does not work well?

Taking oral chemotherapy exactly how your doctor or nurse tells you gives it the best chance of working. If the oral chemotherapy does not slow down or stop the cancer, your doctor will talk with you about other treatment options.

■ If you need to stop oral chemotherapy

Oral chemotherapy can cause side effects, just like other chemo can. Call your nurse, clinic, or doctor if you have any of these symptoms: nausea and vomiting (throwing up), diarrhea, painful sores in your mouth, a rash, a fever, an infection, bleeding, or any other problems your health care team tells you to look for. Call your health care team right away if you have questions or concerns. Waiting even 1 or 2 days can be dangerous.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY: If a child, pet, or other family member accidentally takes your oral chemo, call the National Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222.

■ Questions to ask the health care team

It is very important to handle oral chemotherapy safely. It can be helpful to bring someone along to your appointments to take notes. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- ▶ What safety measures should I take when handling this medicine?
- ▶ Do I take my oral chemotherapy daily, or by some other schedule? Should I use a medication calendar, an app, or both?
- ▶ What if I miss a dose of my oral chemo or throw it up?
- ▶ Where should I store this medicine?
- ▶ What side effects could this medicine cause? Should I stop taking it if I have those side effects?
- ▶ What should I do with any medicine I don't take?
- ▶ How much does this medicine cost? Does my insurance pay for it? If not, are there any financial assistance programs?
- ▶ How do I get a refill of my oral chemo?
- ▶ How often will I see my doctor or chemotherapy nurse?
- ▶ How often do I need tests, including blood tests?
- ▶ What else should I know before I start taking this medicine?

Number to call with questions _____

Number to call on weekends, holidays, and after hours _____

**Find more information at www.cancer.net/chemotherapy and www.cancer.net/safestorage.
For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.**

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Health Care Professionals: To order more printed copies, please call 888-273-3508 or visit www.cancer.net/estore.

Words to know

Caregiver: Someone who helps with your medical care, daily activities, or both.

Chemotherapy: The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells.

Dose: The amount of medicine you take at a time.

Medical oncologist: A doctor who specializes in treating cancer with medication.

Medicine calendar: A calendar that shows when you take each dose of medicine. You, your nurse, or your caregiver might write on the calendar. Or, it might be on a computer or your phone.

Oncology nurse: A member of your treatment team who specializes in caring for people with cancer. This includes giving chemotherapy.

Side effects: Problems or feelings a medicine or other treatment causes. For example, nausea can be a side effect of taking chemotherapy.

Symptoms: Problems or feelings an illness causes. For example, pain can be a symptom of cancer.

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