

Oncology – Chemotherapy

Introduction

You have been referred to start a course of chemotherapy before you start your treatment you will be given an appointment with a nurse to talk through your prescribed treatment. This appointment will explain the specific treatment you will be receiving the potential side effects and how you can help yourself.

What is chemotherapy

Chemotherapy (cytotoxic chemotherapy) is drug treatment that works by stopping cancerous cells from reproducing and growing.

Chemotherapy is given in different ways, however once it is in your system it is carried in the blood stream allowing it to reach the cancer cells.

Different chemotherapy drugs affect the cells in different ways. Some are targeted therapies that work only on the cancer cells, but many also affect healthy cells, this is why you may have some side effects from your treatment.

When do I have treatment?

The course of your treatment is measured in cycles. How many cycles and the frequency depends on your chemotherapy regimen.

The first day is known as day 1 – this is the day that your treatment cycle starts.

Blood tests are very important – without them you cannot have your treatment. You will be advised when you need to have your blood tests carried out and you must keep to these dates.

You will also have regular review appointments with a nurse/doctor/pharmacist before your chemotherapy cycles.

Bone marrow suppression

Chemotherapy affects cells produced in your bone marrow. These will be monitored closely by carrying out regular blood tests during your treatment.

You may here these terms used:

Neutropenia – when your neutrophil count is low

Anaemia – when your red blood cell count is low

Side effects from a reduced level of cells in the bone marrow can occur as soon as day 2, however it is more common for this to occur between days 7 and 14.

It is vital to remember that this timescale is a guide only and bone marrow suppression could happen at any time during your treatment.

A reduction in these cells can lead to serious complications and if you are not assessed promptly your health can deteriorate rapidly.

There is a risk of death from infection.

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When should you call?

In your treatment record book, there is information about side effects and when to call the emergency assessment number for advice.

Signs and symptoms of an infection

Temperature changes (below 36.0 or above 37.5)

Shivering/feeling hot and cold

Clammy

Sore throat or persistent cough

Diarrhoea or persistent nausea and vomiting

Changes in urine output

Redness or swelling around a wound or line

Generally feeling unwell

Temperature

You only need to take your temperature if you feel unwell, hot, and cold and before you call the Emergency Assessment Bay (EAB) – they will always ask you what your temperature is.

Please check your temperature prior to taking any medicines such as paracetamol or ibuprofen that may lower your temperature.

It is important that you have access to a digital thermometer and that you familiarise yourself with how to use it.

Possible side effects

Not everyone on treatment will experience side effects.

However, it is important that we prepare you for the side effects that you may experience and inform you of what to do if they occur.

Feeling or being sick

Not everyone experiences this during treatment.

You will be given anti-sickness medicines that are specific to your treatment. It is important that you take these as directed.

If these medicines are not effective, you are being sick or you are eating and drinking much less than normal then you should call us.

What can I do?

Avoid eating fried foods or foods with a strong smell

Avoid eating or preparing food when you feel sick

Prepare small meals, eat little and often

Eat cold or warm meals if the smell of hot food makes you feel sick

Eat several small snacks throughout the day

Sip drinks slowly

Ginger biscuits or ginger beer help some people

Do not drink a lot before you eat

Diarrhoea

You may experience diarrhoea during your treatment – some treatment is more likely to cause this than others.

You can become dehydrated quickly if diarrhoea continues.

It is important that you follow the advice given if this happens to you.

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What can I do?

If you experience diarrhoea, you should avoid spicy foods, high fibrous foods such as raw fruit and vegetable and brown pasta or rice and increase your fluid intake to 2-3 litres per day.

Take 2 Loperamide tablets (anti-diarrhoea medicine), you can take a further tablet with each episode of diarrhoea **up to a maximum of 8 tablets in 24 hours.**

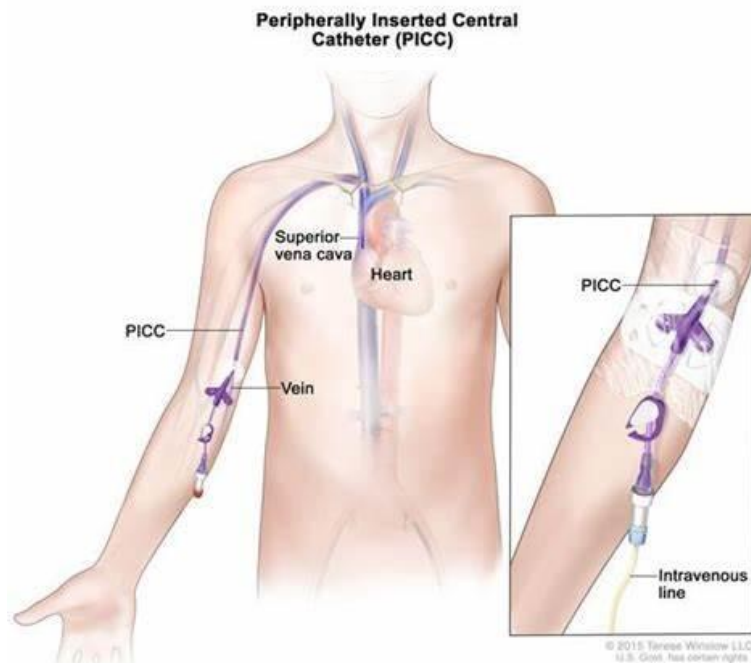
If you have more than 3-4 episodes in 24 hours you should call the emergency assessment number

Intravenous treatment

You may have a cannula (a small plastic tube) inserted into your hand or lower arm. This will be done each time you come in for treatment and will be removed before you go home.



You may need to have a central line fitted, which will normally stay in for the duration of your treatment. This will depend on the type of chemotherapy that you have and how easy it is to insert needles into your veins.



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Ambulatory pumps

These pumps contain chemotherapy in a balloon which gradually deflates over approximately 48 hours. If your regimen requires that you have a pump to go home with, your nurse will explain in more detail and give you some written guidance.



Oral treatment

Only certain anti-cancer drugs can be taken as a tablet.

This is still a chemotherapy medicine, and the side effects can be just as serious as with medicines given through the vein.

You will be given a booklet and if needed we can provide something to help you keep track of your medication.

What can I do to help myself?

Infection

Have a thermometer at home

Avoid unhygienic food outlets

Ask family and friends to avoid contact with you if they are unwell

Limit the use of public transport and visiting particularly crowded areas

Wear gloves when dealing with animal waste and when gardening

Maintain good hand hygiene

Have a flu jab during flu season (but avoid live vaccinations such as shingles)

Avoid raw or undercooked eggs, meats, and undercooked pasteurised foods such as soft/blue cheese and pate

Avoid dental treatment during treatment unless urgent – tell your dentist that you are having chemotherapy treatment and ring the emergency assessment number

Drinking

Keeping well hydrated during your treatment may sometimes help:

Reduce constipation

Prevent dehydration if you experience diarrhoea

Cannulation and blood taking

During your treatment aim to drink around 2 litres of fluid daily (unless directed otherwise).

Medication

Take medicines as directed

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The contents of this information has been reviewed and approved by the WCOH Divisional Governance Committee of Northampton General Hospital on 22/3/22

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Call the emergency assessment number for advice if needed

Do **not** start any new medicines (including herbal) without discussing with us

Take your temperature before taking medicines such as paracetamol/ibuprofen as they may lower your temperature

Exercise

Rest well but still carry out normal daily tasks as you feel able

Light exercise such as walking can reduce your risk of a blood clot and exercise has been shown to have a positive effect on reducing the side effects that you may experience

Fatigue

Try to stick to a routine – sleep at regular times

Light exercise such as walking may help to improve your sleep pattern

Check with your nurse that any steroids that you are prescribed are taken at appropriate times

Longer term side effects

Some people may have late effects from chemotherapy. These are side effects that you still have six months after chemotherapy, or side effects that begin years later.

Late effects may be minor and not affect your day-to-day life very much, or they may be more troublesome or difficult to live with and interfere your daily life.

Late effects are not common, and any risk is usually outweighed by the benefits of having chemotherapy treatment. It is important to report side effects and symptoms both during and after your chemotherapy treatment which may reduce the risk of these being experienced long term.

Some drugs may cause an early menopause, infertility (both in men and women), numbness in the fingers and toes and hearing problems.

You may be more tired than usual for several months after treatment or have difficulty concentrating or remembering things.

Rarely, some chemotherapy treatment has caused a second cancer later in life.

Other resources available

MacMillan Information Centre

Located on the ground floor of the Oncology building

Hair and Beauty Service

Located on the ground floor of the Oncology building

MacMillan Nurses/Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS)

You will have a Nurse Specialist according to your cancer type/primary tumour site



Access a range of health and wellbeing videos, created and hosted by our healthcare teams across the University Hospitals of Northamptonshire. Learn more about treatments, side effects, managing your physical and emotional health and much more.

Scan the QR Code or visit

www.youtube.com/c/thenorthantscancerinformationhub