

Self-care Tips for Chemotherapy Patients

What is Chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of anti-cancer (cytotoxic) drugs to destroy cancer cells or inhibit their growth. Sometimes one drug is used, but sometimes a combination of several drugs is necessary.

Chemotherapy is given in cycles of treatment. The whole course lasts from several months to a year. The length of each cycle depends on the drug(s) used, but it is typically from a few hours to a few days. Each cycle is followed by a rest period without treatment which allows normal cells of the body to recover from any side effects of the treatment.

How Are the Drugs Given?

1. Intravenous injection

- Each injection takes a few hours to a few days, depending on the drug(s) used
- Drugs are given through a tube inserted into your vein

2. Other routes

- Injection into a muscle (intramuscular) or under the skin (subcutaneous), oral administration, etc.

Common Side Effects and How to Deal with Them

1. Fatigue

- Make changes to your work and daily routines and have plenty of rest
- Do some light exercises, such as walking
- Eat to get adequate energy

2. Nausea, vomiting and poor appetite

- Not everyone will have these sick feelings. The reaction usually starts a few hours to a few days after chemotherapy
 - ✓ Eat something that can easily be digested before having treatment
 - ✓ Have several small meals each day. Eat foods that can be digested easily (e.g. soup, congee and toast) to facilitate absorption
 - ✓ Take anti-sickness drugs (antiemetics) prescribed by your doctor when necessary

3. Constipation or diarrhoea

- Some chemotherapy drugs, analgesics and antiemetics may act on your intestinal lining, resulting in constipation or diarrhoea
 - ✓ Eat more liquid food and have several small meals each day
 - ✓ Increase your intake of fibre by eating more fruits and vegetables if you are constipated. If you have diarrhoea, eat less fibre and avoid oily food
 - ✓ Take medicines prescribed by your doctor when necessary

4. Mouth ulcers

- Your oral mucosa may become inflamed or ulcerated (e.g. canker sore) after taking some chemotherapy drugs
 - ✓ Keep your mouth clean. Rinse your mouth after eating
 - ✓ Use an analgesic mouth rinse when necessary
 - ✓ Consult your doctor if you have difficulty swallowing or if your mouth or throat becomes unusually swollen, sore or ulcerated

5. Hair loss

- Some chemotherapy drugs may cause partial or complete hair loss, affecting the eyebrows, lashes, pubic and body hair
- Hair loss is only temporary. Hair will grow back once you have completed your treatment
 - ✓ You may wear a scarf, hat or wig

6. Nerve/ muscular pain or numbness

- You may experience numbness or a tingling sensation in your fingers and toes after taking some chemotherapy drugs. Some drugs may affect your joints and muscles, resulting in pain
 - ✓ Take analgesics prescribed by your doctor when necessary
 - ✓ Consult your doctor if the pain or numbness becomes severe

7. Affected heart, lung and liver functions

- Some chemotherapy drugs may affect heart, lung and liver functions
 - ✓ You may develop symptoms such as chest tightness, palpitations, shortness of breath and jaundice
 - ✓ It is important to have blood tests before and regularly during your course of treatment to make sure that your liver function is not impaired
 - ✓ Cardiac function assessment may be performed before the treatment starts

8. Affected bone marrow function

- Some chemotherapy drugs may affect bone marrow function, causing a drop in the number of red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets
- You will have regular blood tests during your course of treatment. This is to make sure the number of your blood cells has returned to normal before giving you another chemotherapy injection
 - ✓ If the number of your white blood cells is low, you will be more prone to infections. Inform your nurse or doctor immediately if you develop a fever or chill, sweat profusely, cough persistently, have a sore throat, or if there is a tingling or burning sensation when you urinate
 - ✓ Avoid crowded places and people with infectious illnesses when the number of your white blood cell is low. Always wash your hands thoroughly. When necessary, you may be given injections to raise your white blood cell count
 - ✓ A drop in the number of your red blood cells may cause anaemia, making you feel tired, dizzy, out of breath and pale. When necessary, you may be given injections to raise your red blood cell count or hospitalised for blood transfusion
 - ✓ A low platelet count means it will be more difficult for your blood to clot. Take care not to knock against something or cut yourself while shaving or cutting your nails. When necessary, you may be given platelet transfusion

9. Fertility problems

- Chemotherapy drugs may affect fertility in both male and female patients
 - ✓ If you are concerned, please feel free to discuss with your doctor

10. Others

- Inform your doctor immediately if there is bleeding, shortness of breath, high fever or weakness in your lower limbs, which may require hospital admission for treatment

Please feel free to talk to us if there is anything you want to know about chemotherapy.

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