

Managing Common Side Effects of Chemotherapy

Patient Information

Oncology Services



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Author ID:	PM/JMB
Leaflet ref:	CC 045
Version:	4
Leaflet title:	Managing Common Side Effects of Chemotherapy
Last review:	January 2023
Expiry:	January 2025



Coronavirus (Covid-19) and your Chemotherapy treatment

People who are undergoing active chemotherapy, immunotherapy or other antibody treatments for cancer are at risk of severe illness if they catch Covid-19. We are therefore asking our patients to observe the following advice:

- Avoid contact with anybody displaying symptoms of Covid-19. These symptoms include high temperature and/or new and continuous cough.
- Do not leave your house, except to attend essential medical appointments.
- Do not attend any gatherings. This includes gatherings of friends and families in private spaces for example family homes, weddings and religious services.
- Do not go out for shopping, leisure or travel. When arranging food medication or postal deliveries, these should be left at the door to minimise contact.
- Keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media.
- If you display any signs of Covid-19 please contact the Christie Hotline on telephone: **0161 4463658**

You are about to begin your Chemotherapy treatment. Chemotherapy can have several side effects; some of the more common ones are explained in further detail in this leaflet. This leaflet will offer you some practical tips on how to manage the potential side effects.

Risk of infection

- Chemotherapy can affect the number of white blood cells in your blood system. When your white blood cells are low you are more likely to get an infection.
- Monitor your temperature regularly and call the Christie hotline on 0161 4463658 if it goes above 37.5°C, or if it drops below 36°C, and you're not feeling well.
- Try to stay away from crowded places and from people who you know have an infection, such as a cold.
- Make sure your food is thoroughly cooked and discuss with your nurse about foods to avoid.
- Wash your hands regularly and maintain good personal hygiene.
- If you have a central or PICC line, protect it from damage and keep the site clean.

Nausea and Vomiting

- You'll be given anti sickness medication before your chemotherapy and to take home.
- Try to eat a small meal a few hours before your chemotherapy.
- Try eating dry foods, such as toast or crackers, first thing in the morning.
- Ginger can help reduce the feeling of sickness. Try crystalized ginger, ginger tea, or ginger biscuits.
- Slowly sipping fizzy drinks through a straw can help reduce nausea.

- Avoid fried, fatty foods or foods with a strong smell.
- Eat cold food if the smell of cooking bothers you.

Diarrhoea and Constipation

- If you experience diarrhoea or constipation your doctor can prescribe medication to help.
- If you have diarrhoea, drink up to two litres of water a day to replace the fluid you lose.
- If you experience diarrhoea try eating less fibre (cereals, raw vegetable and fruits).
- If you experience 4-6 episodes of diarrhoea, then call the Christie hotline as you might have an infection that requires treatment.
- Some anti-sickness medication can cause you to become constipated. If this persists, your doctor can prescribe medication to help.
- When experiencing constipation try eating more fibre.

Tiredness

- Listen to your body, rest when you need to rest.
- Make sure you are eating well and drinking lots.
- Do some gentle exercise each day– this can help improve your energy levels.
- If you are tired because you are sleeping badly, you may be helped by a short course of sleeping tablets.
- If your poor sleep is related to depression, your doctor may suggest anti-depressants. You may also benefit from speaking to a counsellor.
- Complimentary therapies can help with fatigue and encourage you to find ways to relax. Speak to your onsite complimentary therapist.
- If you live alone, or you have young children, speak to the onsite Macmillan advisor about whether extra support is available.

Effects on your nervous system

- Some chemotherapy can make you feel restless, anxious, dizzy, and sleepy or give you headaches. Speak to your doctor if you experience any of these side effects as they can often prescribe medication to help.
- If chemotherapy is making you forgetful, don't worry, this can happen. Try making lists, using post-it notes, calendars and using mobile phone reminders.
- Do some mental exercises. Eat well and get plenty of rest.

Taste changes and loss of appetite

- Chemotherapy can affect your sense of taste. Food may lack flavour or taste more salty or bitter.

- Cold foods might taste better than hot foods.
- Try drinking fresh fruit juices or sucking sweets.
- Use seasoning, marinades, spices and herbs to flavour cooking.
- If you have a poor appetite, eat little amounts often.
- Keep snacks that you can graze on such as nuts, grated cheese or dried fruits.
- Maintain a healthy and well-balanced diet filled with lots of proteins, fresh fruit and vegetables.
- If you are having problems eating, let your doctor know as they can prescribe dietary supplements and refer you to see a dietician if necessary.

Mouth problems

- Some chemotherapy may cause you to develop a sore mouth and ulcers. Good oral hygiene can help to prevent this.
- Drink plenty of water to keep your mouth moist.
- Sensodyne mouth wash advised. Avoid Listerine or any Alcohol based mouthwash products. Your doctor can prescribe (Benzydamine) mouthwash to help.
- Brush your teeth, gums and tongue with a soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste after meals and at bedtime. (Sensodyne tooth paste is advised).
- Choose foods that are easy to chew and swallow.
- Softening food with gravy or sauces can help if you have trouble swallowing.

Skin and nail changes

- Use a gentle moisturising cream if your skin becomes dry or itchy. Check with your nurse if you are unsure what moisturiser to use, especially if you are also having radiotherapy.
- If you go out in the sun, wear a high factor sun cream. Factor 30/50 dependant on skin type.
- Avoid wet shaving– an electric razor is less likely to irritate or damage your skin.
- Protect your nails by keeping them moisturised. It is fine to wear nail polish but avoid wearing fake nails.
- Wear gloves when doing chores. Excessive exposure to water can lead to fungal infections of the nail bed.
- Tell your doctor if you notice any signs of infection such as weeping from the nail bed, or a bad odour.
- Make sure you wear well fitted shoes, especially if your toe nails are affected by chemotherapy.

Hair loss and looking after your hair

- Cutting your hair short before you start chemotherapy can stop the weight of the hair pulling on your scalp which can cause hair to fall out more easily.
- Wearing a hairnet or turban at night prevents hair from becoming tangled.
- You will be given a wig voucher which can be redeemed locally.
- Use gentle hair products, pat hair dry after washing and use a wide-toothed comb to avoid putting strain on your hair.
- Avoid using hair dryers, straighteners and curling tongues as these may damage your hair.
- Avoid dying or perming your hair if your scalp is brittle or your scalp is dry.
- Hair dressers can advise you on natural, mild, vegetable-based hair dyes should you wish to colour your hair, but always ensure a strand test is done first.

Dietary Advice

- Wash your hands before preparing food and after handling raw food.
- Thoroughly clean utensils before use and in between use with raw and cooked foods.
- Store food as directed and ensure that raw food is kept separate from ready to eat food.
- Wash all raw fruits, vegetables and fresh herbs with cold running water.
- Any meat you eat should be cooked thoroughly to ensure any food poisoning bacteria is killed.
- It is ok to have takeaway food as long it is from somewhere you know has a good food hygiene rating.
- Avoid shellfish or ensure it has a good sell-by date and is cooked thoroughly.
- All milk, yogurt, cheese, and other dairy products should have the word pasteurized on their containers.
- Avoid probiotic drinks and bio-yoghurts. This includes products such as Yakult, Actimel, and Activia yoghurts/drinks.
- Avoid eating pâté as it may contain food poisoning bacteria.
- It is not advisable to eat runny eggs. Yolks and whites should be cooked solid. Do not eat foods that may have raw eggs in them.
- Cooked egg dishes should be served immediately and eaten when piping hot.
- You may reheat food, apart from dishes containing chicken. Ensure re-heated food is piping hot.

Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends, and carers.

Contact Us

Tel: 01942 822376 (Monday to Friday 9am until 4pm)

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Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the positives and negatives of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use, and store the information we hold about you, please see patient information leaflet, Ref. **Corp 006** How we use your information, this can be found on the Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website, see details on the front cover.

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille, and other languages upon request. For more information, please ask in the department/ward.

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