

# Introduction to Chemotherapy

## Patient Information



### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is treatment with drugs and medicine, given to kill cancer cells. These medicines can be dangerous if not taken as instructed.

#### How is chemotherapy given?

- By mouth as tablets,
- By injection into a muscle or under the skin,
- By injection into a vein.

Cancer cells are abnormal cells that do not function properly. They grow in an uncontrolled manner. They can break away from their original site and spread to other parts of the body.

#### How do the medicines work?

Chemotherapy drugs travel to all parts of the body in the blood. They treat the original cancer as well as cancer cells that may have spread. Chemotherapy has its greatest effect on rapidly dividing cells, like cancer cells, by interfering with their ability to divide and grow. Some normal cells also divide and grow quickly. These will be affected, but normal cells recover more readily.

#### How often will I have chemotherapy?

It will depend on the type of cancer you have and the chemotherapy drugs being used. Between treatments you will have 'rest' periods. These rest periods allow your normal cells to recover. Your treatment will continue as long as the drugs are being effective, or for a definite number of treatments. This will depend on the type of cancer you have. Discuss this with your doctor or nurse.

#### Will it affect my daily living?

Most chemotherapy is given on an outpatient basis. Sometimes, a period of hospitalisation is necessary. We try to arrange treatment schedules to interfere as little as possible with normal activities. Most patients receiving chemotherapy live normal lives: working, caring for families, going to school and keeping socially active.

#### Are there any side-effects?

Everyone reacts to chemotherapy differently. Some patients will notice no side-effects, others will have a few. Side-effects occur because chemotherapy drugs affect the body's normal cells as well as the cancer cells. The cells most commonly affected are the digestive tract (mouth, stomach, and bowels), hair follicles, bladder and bone marrow. Most side effects are temporary because the normal cells recover quickly. Some side effects can be avoided or decreased by immediate management of side effects. The particular side effects you may experience will depend on the chemotherapy drugs you receive. Your doctor and nurse will talk to you about the side effects you could experience, those you should report and what you can do to lessen them.

#### What can I do to make the best of chemotherapy?

- Understand your treatment. If you do not understand, ask your doctor, the chemotherapy nurses or oncology specialist
- Cooperate with your healthcare providers. Follow all instructions and keep all your appointments
- Communicate with your chemotherapy team. They need to know before they can help
- Take control of your life. Be in charge. Bodies recognise routine and feel better for it

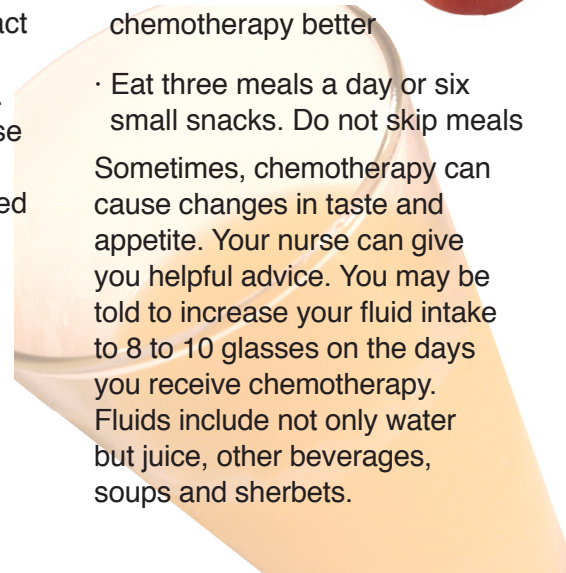
#### Eating & Chemotherapy

*Good nutrition is important when you undergo chemotherapy.*

By eating well:

- You help your body repair and build new tissue
- You help maintain strength
- You tolerate chemotherapy better
- Eat three meals a day or six small snacks. Do not skip meals

Sometimes, chemotherapy can cause changes in taste and appetite. Your nurse can give you helpful advice. You may be told to increase your fluid intake to 8 to 10 glasses on the days you receive chemotherapy. Fluids include not only water but juice, other beverages, soups and sherbets.





### Alcoholic beverages

Use of alcoholic beverages in moderation, such as wine, beer and cocktails, is usually allowable. Check with your nurse – in some cases it is essential to avoid alcohol.

### Nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting are side effects you might experience. It may occur immediately or some hours after your treatment. You will be given medication to minimise these effects. Not all chemotherapy causes nausea and vomiting.

#### **Helpful hints for nausea and vomiting**

- Eat lightly before your treatments
- Avoid things that may make you nauseated. i.e. strong smells, spicy, oily or fatty foods
- Eat small amounts of easily digested food
- You may prefer five or six snacks rather than three large meals

#### **Some foods that may be helpful if you are feeling sick:**

- Coke or ginger ale
- Dry toast or crackers
- Cold fruits
- Clear soups or broth
- Hard candies
- Tea

Take anti-nausea medication as directed by your nurse or doctor.

Always report continuous nausea or vomiting.

## What you really need to know.

If you do not understand something please ask.

## Chemotherapy & Side Effects

### Soreness of the mouth or throat

Some anti-cancer drugs cause a sore mouth. It does not occur immediately, but several days after receiving your treatment. Good mouth care is important. See your Dentist for regular check-ups every 6 months. Inform him/her that you are receiving chemotherapy. Brush your teeth after meals. Use a soft toothbrush. Soak your toothbrush and dentures in hydrogen peroxide for one hour each day. Rinse well.

#### **If you get a sore mouth or throat**

- Inform your doctor or nurse
- Keep your mouth moist to prevent infection and bleeding
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Rinse your mouth several times a day with a baking soda solution, club soda, a solution of hydrogen peroxide or apple juice
- Avoid using commercial mouthwashes as they contain alcohol, which will burn

#### **BAKING SODA SOLUTION**

1 tsp. baking soda  
in 10 - 16 ounces of water

#### **HYDROGEN PEROXIDE SOLUTION**

1 part peroxide to 3 parts water

#### **Suggestions for lessening the discomfort of sore mouth or throat**

- Avoid alcohol, tobacco and very hot or cold, spicy, acidic, salty or hard foods
- Choose soft, moist foods and use extra butter, margarine, sauces and gravies

### Effects on bowels

Some chemotherapy drugs can affect your bowels by causing constipation or diarrhoea. Constipation can be relieved by increasing the fluids you drink and including natural laxatives in your diet like bran and prune juice. Frequently, commercial laxatives may be necessary.

If you get diarrhoea, note the colour and frequency of your movements. Always report persistent diarrhoea lasting more than three days. To help control diarrhoea, reduce your fibre intake and avoid whole wheat and bran foods, berries, nuts, corn and beans. Increase the amount of fluid you drink to replace what you lose with the diarrhoea.

### Effect on bladder and kidneys

With some chemotherapy drugs, it is important to increase your fluid intake to prevent damage to the kidneys or bladder. Your doctor/nurse will give you specific instructions if you are receiving one of these drugs.

### Effects on bone marrow

Blood cells are made mainly in your bone marrow. These blood cells are white blood cells, red blood cells and platelets. The numbers of any or all of these may be temporarily decreased by chemotherapy. You will have regular blood tests to monitor your blood count.

Red blood cells supply your body with oxygen. A decrease in their number can result in fatigue, dizziness or shortness of breath. By including rest periods in your daily routine, it may help your body to cope with these effects. White

blood cells fight against bacteria/germs to prevent infection. When there is a decrease in the number of white cells you will be more likely to develop infection. Platelets help the blood to clot and prevent bleeding. If your platelet count is lowered, bleeding may occur without injury and be slow to stop.

### Always report:

- A fever (Temperature above 100.4°F or 38°C)
- Shaking/chills
- Sore mouth or throat
- Cough with coloured sputum
- Burning when passing urine, cloudy urine or blood in urine
- Diarrhoea lasting more than three days

### What you should do:

- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating
- Keep your body clean ...bathe daily
- Brush your teeth after meals
- Wash your hands before handling food and after using the toilet
- Walk outdoors regularly to increase the oxygen exchange in your lungs and help prevent respiratory problems
- Avoid people with contagious illnesses including colds, flu, cold sores, shingles, chicken pox and measles

### **Always report any sign of bleeding or bruising.**

To lessen any complications that may result from a low platelet count:

- Use a soft toothbrush
- Avoid contact sports
- Avoid strenuous activity, especially body building exercises
- Use an electric razor

**DO NOT USE  
ASPIRIN or  
ASPIRIN-CONTAINING  
PRODUCTS**



### Hair loss

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause gradual thinning and loss of hair. A few can cause more sudden hair loss occurring 2-3 weeks after the drug is given. Eyebrows, beard and other body hair may also thin and grow more slowly. Your hair will grow back when the chemotherapy drug is stopped and sometimes before. When hair regrows, there may be some changes in the colour or texture. Your nurse will tell you if your chemotherapy may cause hair loss.

### Skin

Some chemotherapy can cause local generalised discolouring of the skin and/or nails, as well as itching, dry, flaky skin. These skin changes will gradually disappear when you finish your chemotherapy. Be gentle with your skin and avoid excessively hot baths & harsh soaps. Skin lotions may relieve dry itchy skin. Certain anticancer drugs can cause the skin to become more sensitive to the sun. Ask your nurse about your chemotherapy. It is important in Bermuda to protect yourself from the sun's rays.

Use a hat, wear a long sleeve shirt and use 15 SPF or higher sunscreen. Do not sunbathe. If you have also had radiation therapy, you need to be even more careful.

## Patient Responsibilities

- Communicate
- Take medications as ordered
- Keep all appointments
- Eat well and report any change in appetite
- Report any change in your condition

## Always Report

- High temperature
- Chills
- Burning feeling when passing urine
- Sore mouth or throat
- Loose bowels for more than two days
- Persistent nausea or vomiting
- Shortness of breath
- Cough
- Any sign of bleeding or bruising
- New or increased pain
- Pain or reddening at injection sites
- Weakness



### **Chemotherapy Clinic**

8:00am to 4:00pm Monday to Friday

Telephone: (441) 239-2033 or (441) 239-1490

Fax: (441) 296-0368

Located on the 1st floor of the Acute Care Wing at  
King Edward VII Memorial Hospital

### **Oncologist's Office**

Telephone: (441) 239-2044

Fax: (441) 239-6330

Email: [oncology@bhb.bm](mailto:oncology@bhb.bm)

### **Useful numbers**

PALS: (441) 236-7257

KEMH Emergency Department: (441) 239-2009

### **Useful links**

American Cancer Society: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

National Cancer Institute: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

Macmillan Cancer Support UK: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Bermuda Cancer & Health Centre: [www.cancer.bm](http://www.cancer.bm)



## **Bermuda Hospitals Board**

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