

# Chemotherapy



Chemotherapy can be used in addition to surgery and radiotherapy for the treatment of breast cancer.

The aim of chemotherapy is to destroy any cancer cells that could have spread outside the breast and armpit, but cannot be detected and to destroy any cancer cells that may be left in the breast. It is called a systemic treatment because it works on the whole body to control cancer.

## HOW DOES CHEMOTHERAPY WORK?

Chemotherapy involves taking drugs that kills cells that are dividing rapidly such as cancer cells.

The most common way of having chemotherapy is by injection into a vein (intravenously or IV), but sometimes chemotherapy drugs are taken as tablets. IV treatment involves the drug being administered through a vein in the hand or arm. Some women have chemotherapy that is a combination of tablets and IV.

Chemotherapy drugs are absorbed into the blood and travel through the body finding and destroying the remaining cancer cells.

## WHERE WILL I GET MY CHEMO?

Usually you will have your chemotherapy in a hospital. You will not need to stay overnight. Each treatment takes between half an hour and a few hours, depending the type of drugs you are receiving.

## HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

Chemotherapy is usually given in cycles. This means you have a short period of treatment followed by a rest period, followed by another period of treatment and so on. You do not receive any treatment during the rest period. This gives your body a chance to rebuild healthy cells and regain strength.

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The length of your treatment and rest periods will depend on the type of breast cancer you have and the type of chemotherapy drugs you're receiving. Some chemotherapy treatment programs last for 3 months, others last for 6 months.

## SIDE EFFECTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY

Chemotherapy drugs affect every woman differently. It is possible that you may experience fewer or more side effects with a particular drug than another women on the same drug. It is also possible to have chemotherapy with very few side effects. If this happens to you, it means you are fortunate – it does not mean that the chemotherapy isn't working.

If you are experiencing any side effects, even if you don't think they are serious, it is important to discuss them with your doctor. Most side effects can be managed with medical care.

### Nausea and Vomiting

It is quite common to feel nausea when having chemotherapy. Nausea can last for a few hours to a few days. Chemotherapy can also make some women vomit. The good news is that nausea and vomiting can usually be controlled with drugs call anti-emetics.

### Fatigue

Feeling tired is one of the main side effects of chemotherapy, and can last 3-6 months after your treatment is finished. Fatigue can also be due to anemia, which means that there are fewer red blood cells in your blood.

You might find it easier to cope with chemotherapy and feeling tired if you can organize some practical help before you start treatment.

In order to manage fatigue it is important to get plenty of rest, eat a balanced diet and exercise daily.

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## Hair Loss

Hair loss from chemotherapy can range from mild thinning of the hair to total hair loss (including body hair).

Not all chemotherapy drugs cause hair loss. If you do lose some hair it will usually grow back within weeks of your last treatment. You might want to wear a scarf, hat, turban or wig to cover your head while your hair grows back. When it does grow back, it could be different texture and possibly a different color.

## Diarrhea and constipation

Some women have diarrhea during chemotherapy treatment. Ask your doctor to recommend something to control this.

Alternatively, some women become constipated during chemotherapy. This can be from the chemotherapy drugs, or from being less active or eating less due to nausea. Some anti-nausea drugs can also cause constipation. Again, ask your doctor for something to relieve this. It is important to ensure you are regular.

## Weight gain or loss

Some women having chemotherapy lose their appetite and lose weight, while other women put on weight. If you lose your appetite, try to eat small meals and snacks as often as you can throughout the day. Doing gentle exercise can help prevent weight gain.

## Depression

Some women feel depressed, sad or teary before, during and after chemotherapy treatment. Some sadness or depression is normal. If your feelings are severe, or interrupting things at home, or affecting your relationships, talk to your doctor about how you're feeling. Effective treatments are available.

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## Anxiety

Some women feel anxious, worried, nervous or distressed before, during and after treatment. Some anxiety is normal. If your anxiety is severe or interrupting things at home, or affecting your relationships, talk to your doctor about how you are feeling. Effective treatments are available.

## Menopausal symptoms

Women who have not yet reached menopause may have menopausal symptoms during chemotherapy.

Not all chemotherapy drugs cause permanent menopause, but some do. The closer you are to the natural menopause age, the more likely it is that the menopause will be permanent. If your menopause is permanent, you will not be able to have children naturally after treatment.

*If your fertility is important to you, ask your doctor:*

- *If there are chemotherapy drugs that are less likely to make you infertile (and if so, how effective are they for your situation).*
- *About freezing some embryos before treatment, so that you might be able to become pregnant in the future.*