

Chemotherapy — Coping With Side Effects

Chemotherapy can greatly reduce the chances of breast cancer returning. However, it can also have side effects (see below). The good news is most of these side effects are temporary. Also, the management of side effects has improved in recent years. Doctors are now using more accurate doses, and there are new medications that can help relieve or prevent some of the side effects. There are also a number of chemotherapy drugs. If one drug is causing severe side effects, your doctor can treat you with another.

Common side effects

Side effects from chemotherapy depend on what drug or combination of drugs is used. The severity of these side effects varies from person to person. Some of the most common side effects are described below.

Nausea and vomiting

Drugs called *antiemetics* can help reduce or prevent nausea and vomiting that can occur during chemotherapy. Eating several small meals throughout the day may also help.

Hair loss (alopecia)

During treatment, your hair may get thinner or may fall out entirely, depending on which chemotherapy drugs you are given. Your hair will grow back after treatment is over, and it may be a different color or texture. Using mild shampoos, soft hair brushes and low heat when drying your hair can help reduce hair loss. Some women may choose to cut their hair short beforehand to gain some control of their hair loss. If you would like to wear a wig, it is a good idea to get it before treatment begins so you can match your hair

What causes side effects?

Chemotherapy drugs are made to kill fast growing cells like breast cancer. But your body also has normal cells that are fast-growing like your hair roots, bone marrow, skin and digestive system. Chemotherapy drugs affect these normal cells, and that is when side effects occur. These normal cells will repair themselves when the chemotherapy leaves your body, and the side effects will subside once treatment is over.

color and style. Ask your nurse to recommend a wig shop. You may also have hair loss from your eyebrows, eyelashes and body. This will also grow back after treatment ends.

Early menopause (when your menstrual period stops)

Some women experience menopausal symptoms such as their menstrual periods stopping, hot flashes and vaginal dryness during treatment. For women who are closer to the age of menopause (45 years or older), these symptoms may be permanent. For younger women, these symptoms may be temporary. Your doctor can help you manage the symptoms of menopause.

Fatigue

This is a very common side effect. Try to get plenty of rest and ask family and friends to help. Aerobic exercise and a well-balanced diet will also help. Your doctor may also recommend a medication that may reduce fatigue.

More (possible) side effects

Remember, this is a list of other possible side effects. Your experience may be different depending on your chemotherapy treatment plan.

Infections

Because chemotherapy reduces the white blood cell count, infections may be more likely to occur. You can help prevent infections by washing your hands often and staying away from others who are ill. If you get a cut or nick, clean it right away. Your doctor should check your blood cell count before each treatment to make sure it is high enough to safely give you chemotherapy.

If you have any sign of infection such as fever while on chemotherapy, you should contact your doctor right away. Sometimes infections while getting chemotherapy can be life-threatening.

Mouth and throat sores

Because the cells in the mouth and throat are fast growing, some chemotherapy drugs affect these areas causing sores or dryness. Get a dental check-up before starting chemotherapy. During treatment, brush your teeth and gums after each meal and at bedtime using a soft toothbrush. Using a toothpaste with baking soda and peroxide can also help. Avoid mouthwashes that contain large amounts of alcohol.

Weight gain

Although the reasons are unclear, some women actually gain weight during chemotherapy. Eating nutritious food and exercising can help maintain your normal weight.

Memory problems (chemo-brain)

Chemotherapy may lead to a general sense of mental fuzziness and short term memory problems. Most women say that these symptoms improve with time.

Planning ahead

Because you never know exactly how you will feel during chemotherapy, make a plan of action before it begins. A good plan can help you manage stress and let you focus your energy on getting better.

For example:

- Make a list of questions about your chemotherapy and possible side effects to ask your doctor.
- Ask a co-survivor (family and friends) to go with you to your treatments. If you live alone, let someone know your treatment schedule so they can be “on call” if you need them.
- Make a list of all the things you do on a daily basis such as household chores or child care. Ask co-survivors (family and friends) to help with any of these activities.
- If you are working, talk with your boss or co-workers about how chemotherapy might affect you and plan accordingly.
- Prepare and freeze meals ahead of time for days when you do not feel like cooking.
- Build a support network among family and friends. Joining a breast cancer support group is also a good idea for some.

Remember, this is just a game plan. Every day will be different. Your first priority should be your health. Let your family and friends help.

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Chemotherapy
- Getting the Support You Need
- Making Treatment Decisions