

YOU AND YOUR CHEMOTHERAPY

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www.cancersupportfrance.info

Useful Telephone Numbers

Your GP (Médecin Traitant)

Name:

Tel:

Your oncologist

Name:

Tel:

Your nurse

Name:

Tel:

Other

Understanding Chemotherapy

What is a tumour?

The human body and all its organs are composed of cells. The cells in a healthy body continuously renew themselves thanks to a balancing act between the cells which reproduce and the cells which die.

A tumour appears when the cells become abnormal and begin to reproduce with no control. A tumour can be benign or malignant (cancerous). When a tumour is malignant, the cells reproduce rapidly and have the power to invade other tissues of the body (metastasis).

What is chemotherapy?

The term 'chemotherapy' refers to the group of drugs used to destroy the cells that multiply rapidly. The progress made in medicine means that, today, there are over 50 different chemical compounds available for use in the treatment of a tumour. Your oncologist will decide which combination is right for your treatment. The drugs used depend upon:

- The type of tumour
- The stage of development
- Your general state of health
- Any treatment that you have already received

What are the goals of chemotherapy?

According to the type of tumour and the stage of development, chemotherapy is used:

- To reduce the size of the tumour to allow more localised surgery
- To prevent the spreading of the tumour
- To destroy the tumour cells that can migrate from the original tumour into other parts of the body
- To reduce the symptoms from the tumour

How often and for how long does chemotherapy last?

The frequency and duration of your chemotherapy will depend upon the type of tumour, the objectives of your treatment, the products used and the reaction of your body to the treatment which it receives. You can have chemotherapy daily, weekly or monthly.

Chemotherapy is often given in a cycle of one or several days followed by a period of rest, but other techniques are possible, for example, a continuous drip over a prolonged period.

How is chemotherapy administered?

Chemotherapy is often administered intravenously:

- Through a vein in your forearm
- Through a deep catheter (implantable chamber or tunnel catheter)

Does chemotherapy hurt?

Receiving chemotherapy is not painful, no matter what type of drug is used. During treatment, nearby veins can become a little inflamed or you could feel a burning sensation. It is important to make your doctor or nurse aware of any pain, burning or uncomfortable feeling experienced during or after treatment.

Can chemotherapy be administered at the same time as treatment for other ongoing illnesses?

Your GP or specialist can prescribe treatment for other illnesses that will not interfere with your chemotherapy. However, some drugs should be avoided as they may interact badly with your chemotherapy, as could some types of food or drink (your oncologist will tell you about this.) As a result, your GP **must** be told about your chemotherapy and your oncologist **must** be made aware of any drugs that you currently take for ongoing illnesses.

Is it possible to work during chemotherapy?

It is not **impossible** to work during chemotherapy; it depends upon your type of job and the side effects which you experience.

How is chemotherapy evaluated?

Your doctor uses several methods to judge the effectiveness of your treatment and also to see if any changes need to be made to your treatment. You will have frequent blood tests, clinical tests and radiology tests. Do not hesitate to ask your doctor for the results of these tests.

Side Effects of Treatment

What causes the side effects?

The anti tumour drugs target the cancerous cells because these are the cells that multiply rapidly. However, certain other cells of the body multiply as rapidly and are therefore also affected by your treatment. This explains why you could experience some of the following side effects during treatment, all of which are described in further detail in the following pages:

- Blood problems
- Nausea and vomiting
- Alterations in your mucus membranes
- Digestive problems
- Changes in your hair, your skin or your nails
- Neurological problems

All of these symptoms do not necessarily occur and they do disappear after finishing treatment.

Blood Problems

The bone marrow produces blood cells: platelets, red (haematite) cells and white (leucocytes) cells, which are then distributed through the blood stream. Bone marrow is very active because blood is being renewed continuously. All these cells multiply rapidly and which makes them very

sensitive to the chemotherapy. All chemotherapy drugs are able to lead to a reduction in the number of blood cells, both red and white, and platelets.

This usually begins one or two weeks after the start of each session of chemotherapy. The duration is variable, but generally lasts a few days. The more intensive the treatment, the greater the risk and the longer the duration.

The most sensitive white cells are the polynuclear neutrophils. The body needs these to fight against infection. A reduction in the number of neutrophils is called neutropenia. This may occur temporarily in the weeks following treatment and, if it does, you are then at greater risk of infection.

If any of the following symptoms occur, inform your doctor as quickly as possible so that antibiotics can be prescribed:

- Fever
- Shivers
- Signs of infection (unexplained coughing, burning while urinating, abscesses...)

A reduction in the number of red blood cells (usually called “anaemia”) can cause paleness or, more rarely, breathing difficulties. Severe anaemia may mean that a blood transfusion is necessary.

Reduction in the number of platelets is called thrombopeny. Platelets are necessary for the clotting of

the blood. Thus, thrombopeny can lead to bleeding. Tell your doctor of any signs of bleeding – even if it is just your gums after brushing your teeth. If you experience severe or prolonged bleeding (eg. from your nose) you may need a transfusion of blood and platelets.

Before you have any treatment tell your doctor if you are taking anticoagulants or aspirin, as these drugs increase the likelihood of bleeding.

Due to the risks of bleeding, infection and anaemia, regular blood tests are carried out between courses of chemotherapy.

During these periods:

- Avoid contact with other people with illnesses or those who have a cold
- Avoid getting a chill
- Make sure you eat well-cooked food and fruit which has been peeled
- Ensure good personal hygiene

ADVICE

In case of bleeding, fever or infection consult your doctor as quickly as possible:

- ***DO NOT take aspirin without prior medical advice***
- ***ALWAYS use a soft tooth brush***

- **Good dental health is important before you begin your treatment**
- **If you need dental care during your treatment, DISCUSS this first with your doctor**

Taste Problems, Nausea, Vomiting

During the course of your chemotherapy, your sensation of taste may change.

Nausea and/or vomiting are also common, but these are often made worse by fear and worry. They may occur after the first treatment and some drugs can lead to more problems than others. Anti-emetic drugs are given to prevent or limit any nausea and vomiting. These can be given intravenously, intramuscularly, orally, or rectally.

Today, the progress that has been made in this area of medicine means that vomiting and nausea are generally well controlled.

ADVICE

- **Have cold drinks**
- **Suck menthol sweets**
- **Do relaxation exercises before and during your treatment**

- **During your treatment: watch television, listen to the radio, read...to distract yourself**
- **If you feel nauseous: do not force yourself to eat, eat food that you would enjoy**

Alterations to the Mucus Membranes - Mouth, Eyes, Vagina and Rectum

Oral

Chemotherapy can affect the saliva in your mouth, throat and, more rarely in your oesophagus, causing a reaction which may be painful (burning or ulceration). Such reactions are likely to be worse if the chemotherapy is associated with radiation to the head or neck. You can prevent or treat these side effects with the use of good oral hygiene.

ADVICE

- **Drink ALKALINE water (rich in bicarbonates)**
- **Brush your teeth with a SOFT brush before and after each meal, at least 3 times a day with a BICARBONATE TOOTHPASTE**
- **Avoid very spicy or acid foods (lemon juice, vinegar, mustard), crudités, dry fruit (nuts, peanuts, etc)**
- **Remove any dental equipment (braces, dentures) before your last tooth brushing session of the day**

Ocular

Chemotherapy can irritate the conjunctiva (or mucous membrane at the front of the eye) and cause watery eyes, sensitivity to light and sometimes even a temporary decrease in the clarity of vision.

ADVICE

- ***Bathe your eyes once or twice a day***
- ***Wear sunglasses***
- Consult your doctor if you experience problems of vision

Vaginal

Chemotherapy can lead to dryness or irritation of the vagina.

ADVICE

- ***Wash frequently with neutral soap***
- ***Consult your doctor in case of symptoms***

Rectal

Chemotherapy can sometimes cause constipation which may lead to advanced haemorrhoids (or piles)

ADVICE

- ***Avoid spicy foods***

- ***Eat regularly***

Digestive Problems: diarrhoea, constipation

In case of diarrhoea, you should:

- Drink large quantities (at least 2 litres of water, broth or soup per day)
- Avoid fruits and dairy products, instead choose rice, pasta, green vegetables
- Talk to your doctor if the diarrhoea is prolonged

In case of constipation, you should:

- Eat foods rich in fibre, fruit, bran, prunes...
- Drink large quantities of water
- NEVER take laxatives without medical advice

BE AWARE that some analgesic and anti-emetic drugs can lead to constipation.

ADVICE

- ***Drink large quantities***
- ***Eat a healthy diet***

Hair, skin and nails

Hair

Hair follicles are composed of rapidly multiplying cells. With some types of chemotherapy drugs, the hair can no longer grow and the existing follicles break at the base, causing hair to fall out in the weeks following the start of treatment. This is known as alopecia. Even eyelashes, eyebrows and pubic hair may fall out. However, at the end of your chemotherapy (or when a particular drug is no longer used), the follicles will begin to function and the hair will grow back. In the space of a few months, your hair will have regrown. It is possible to have a painful or tingling scalp before any hair loss.

Loss of hair may be limited by wearing a “cold cap” during treatment, but it will not prevent loss of some hair. Your oncologist will advise you if this is suitable.

ADVICE

- ***If your drugs WILL lead to the loss of all or some of your hair: cut your hair shorter than usual BEFORE you start your treatment, avoid perms and do not dye your hair***
- ***Consider wearing a wig. A wig is partly reimbursable by the Social Security (CPAM) BUT you MUST obtain a prescription from your doctor first. You may also be entitled to contribution through your “mutuelle”***

Skin

Certain drugs administered through an intravenous line can lead to pigmentation along the course of the vein, this can be limited by protecting the arm attached to the drip from the light (your doctor will advise you if this is likely).

Photosensitivity may develop through the course of your treatment and it is advisable to avoid prolonged exposure to the sun.

Dryness to the soles of the feet and palms of the hands may occur, ask advice from your doctor who can prescribe a suitable cream.

Nails

They may become ridged or brittle in the same way that the skin may become pigmented.

REMEMBER that after your treatment has finished all these symptoms will disappear.

ADVICE

- ***Avoid prolonged exposure to the sun***
- ***Well hydrate your skin***
- ***Alert your doctor of any problems***

Neurological Problems

Pins and needles of the hands and feet

Certain chemotherapy products can cause pins and needles in the hands and feet.

This side effect may mean that you need additional vitamins B1-B6

NOTIFY your doctor immediately so that he can prescribe accordingly.

Hypersensitivity to the cold

Some chemotherapy drugs cause hypersensitivity to the cold. In this case, avoid cold drinks and all contact with the cold including freezers and frozen food.

Living with Chemotherapy

BE AWARE

Chemotherapy can be tiring. You may find that the fatigue is similar to that experienced during a full working day. However, if your fatigue is intense, it could be due to something else, for example, infection, anaemia, or perhaps depression.

Chemotherapy may lead to difficulties in concentration.

There is no risk of contagion for those around you.

Your sex life should be the same as before you became ill, nevertheless, chemotherapy may cause changes to your body cycles and any fatigue can lead to a drop in libido.

ADVICE

- ***Do not isolate yourself, you are not contagious***
- ***Need for rest is normal and necessary***
- ***Develop a strict personal hygiene regime***
- ***Remember that your care team is there to answer your questions***

Dietary Advice

During treatment, a balanced diet is very important. You must not drink too much alcohol and, in particular, you

should avoid fortified wines and spirits that can irritate the digestive tract.

Food should not be too spicy. Avoid vinegar and lemon juice.

Chemotherapy is tiring because the treatment may sap your energy SO treat yourself and have what you like to eat and drink from time to time! !.

ADVICE

- ***Brush your teeth after each meal***
- ***Eat several small meals***
- ***Choose cold food and iced drinks in case of nausea***
- ***Eat foods like meats, fish, eggs, cheese, dairy products and sugary drinks to give you energy even if you would not normally do so***

Other Help

The cost of your treatment and consultations with your doctors who are part of the State Scheme will be reimbursed by Social Security. The cost of transport to and from hospital (train, taxi, ambulance) is also reimbursed.

You can also ask for help from:

- A social assistant
- A psychologist
- A psychiatrist

- A dietician

ADVICE

- ***Your care team may suggest a psychologist to support you and your family***
- ***Do not hesitate to ask for complementary information ie. relaxation techniques***

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO COVER EVERYTHING IN THIS BOOKLET - DO NOT HESITATE TO ASK YOUR CARE TEAM FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND ADVICE WHENEVER YOU NEED IT - THEY ARE THERE TO HELP YOU