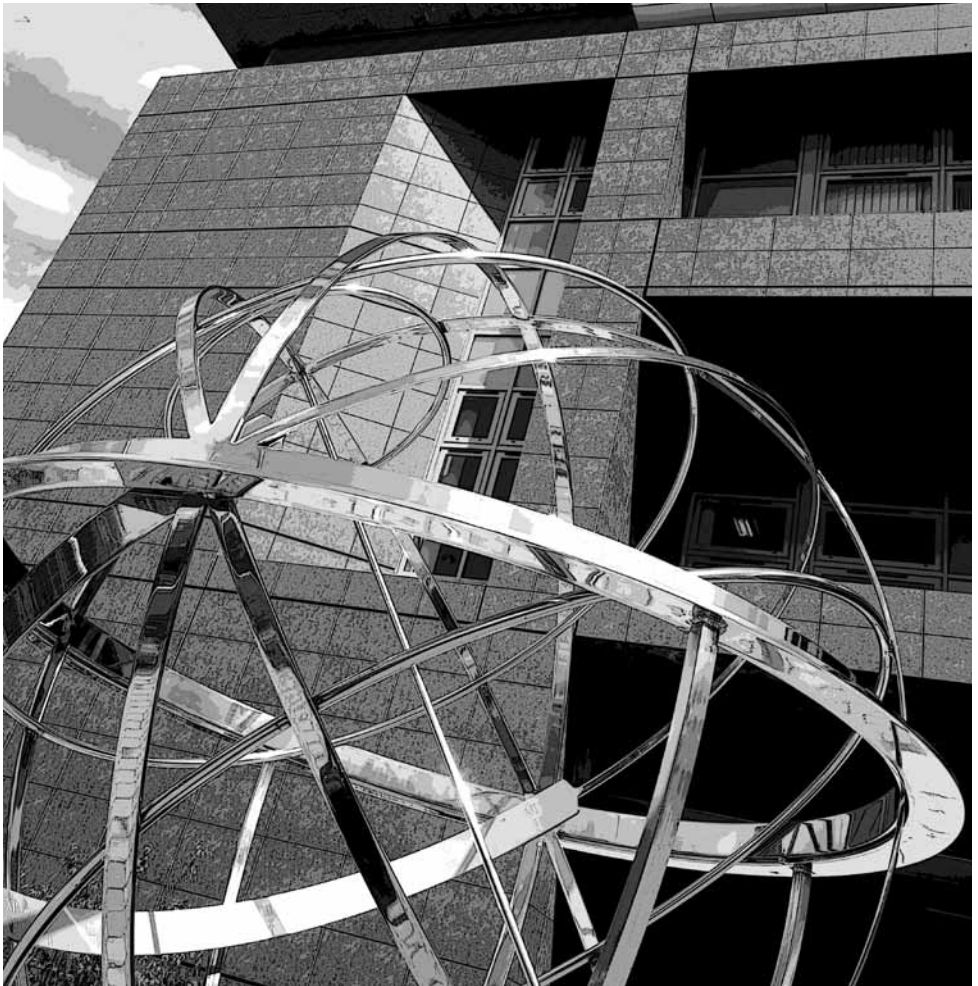


Department of Clinical Haematology

# Coping with the side effects of Chemotherapy

Information for patients



You may find this booklet helpful if you or someone close to you is having chemotherapy treatment.

It explains some practical ways to help you cope with the side effects of chemotherapy.

Not everyone having chemotherapy will suffer unpleasant side effects. However, most people have some symptoms because of the treatment.

There are many different chemotherapy regimes, some having specific side effects. This leaflet contains a range of the most common side effects that can occur.

Your doctor will prescribe drugs to help with many of these side effects but there are also ways in which you can help yourself.

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## Infections

We all have bacteria on and in our bodies, especially the skin, nose, throat, stomach and bowel. Some people also carry viruses, for example herpes, which can cause cold sores.

These bacteria and viruses are usually harmless and do not generally cause problems. However, after chemotherapy the white cells that help you to fight infection (neutrophils) are often greatly reduced. If your neutrophil count is very low you are said to be neutropenic.

When you are neutropenic most infections come from bacteria on or within yourself, and not from contact with other people. No matter how careful you are you cannot prevent all infections.

However, there are some ways that you can help to reduce your exposure to bacteria and viruses at this time.

- Avoid crowded places, e.g. buses, cinemas and supermarkets.
- Try to avoid close contact with people who have coughs or colds, and anyone who has got or been in contact with infectious diseases such as shingles, chicken pox or measles.
- Try to prevent any injuries; broken skin provides a good entry point for bacteria.
- Have a daily bath or shower.
- Always wash your hands before eating, preparing food and after going to the toilet.
- Women should wipe from front to back after opening their bowels, and avoid using tampons.
- Avoid using a razor – an electric or battery shaver is best.
- Do not to use heavily scented soaps, talc, perfumes etc. as this can cause irritation to your skin.

- Try to stop your skin from becoming dry or cracking by using a gentle moisturiser, for example aqueous cream or E45.
- If you have pierced ears or body piercing, keep the holes clean and tell a doctor or nurse if they become red or sore.

## Oral hygiene

Chemotherapy treatment affects the cells in your body that are rapidly dividing. The drugs cannot tell the difference between cancer cells and other rapidly dividing cells in your body such as hair, skin, bone marrow and those cells lining the mouth, throat, stomach and bowel.

Some specific chemotherapy drugs are more likely to cause mouth discomfort. However, it is advisable for all patients receiving chemotherapy to take care of their mouth, particularly during periods of neutropenia.

- Have regular dental check-ups but remember to tell your dentist about your condition and any chemotherapy you are receiving. He may need to delay treatment or contact your hospital doctor for advice.
- Use a small, soft toothbrush and brush your teeth gently. Try and brush your teeth after meals. If you wear dentures, clean them regularly after meals and soak them in a mouthwash overnight.
- Replace your toothbrush regularly to minimise infection risk.
- Check your mouth for sores. Let your doctor or nurse know if you are concerned.
- Try to prevent your lips from becoming dry and cracked by using Vaseline, lip salve or something similar.

## Nausea and vomiting

Nausea is a feeling of sickness and to vomit is to be sick. Chemotherapy can make some people feel sick and vomit. Your doctor will prescribe anti-sickness drugs to try to prevent these symptoms. There are many anti-sickness drugs to choose from so do not despair if the first choice does not work!

As well as drugs, you may find that the following suggestions help:

- Despite feeling sick, it is important to try to drink. Little and often may be best.
- Chilled drinks sipped through a straw can help. Avoid fizzy drinks but flat carbonated drinks are usually well tolerated.
- Sucking ice cubes or ice pops is often refreshing.
- Try to eat small, light meals at regular intervals if you are able. Dry foods such as toast and plain or ginger biscuits may be helpful.
- Avoid spicy and fatty fried foods, and also foods that have strong flavours and smells. Cold foods that are bland do not sound very exciting but are often well tolerated.
- Try to wear loose clothing – avoid tight waistbands.
- Try to rest for a while after you have eaten, but avoid lying flat.
- This may not be the best time to eat your favourite foods as they may then become associated with nausea and could put you off them.

Tension and anxiety can make nausea and vomiting worse. It is not always easy to control these feelings but if you are able to relax this may help your symptoms and improve your general wellbeing. Relaxation, and some complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, may help so please ask your nurse or doctor for advice.

Some people have found 'Sea-Bands' helpful in reducing nausea. These are elastic wristbands that press on an acupressure point on each wrist. Sea-Bands can be bought from larger chemists and may be worn during each chemotherapy treatment.

## Loss of appetite

It is very common to lose your appetite because of your illness and the treatment. Maintaining your weight can play an important part in your recovery and therefore it is important to try to prevent excessive weight loss.

- Try to eat small, frequent meals about every 2-3 hours.
- Eat slowly, chew your food well and relax for a short time between courses and after each meal.
- Keep nutritious snacks handy so that you can eat when you feel hungry rather than waiting for the next meal.
- Make use of pre-packed meals and accept any offers of help, as you may not want to bother cooking.
- A glass of wine, sherry or your favourite tippie may help to stimulate your appetite (check with your doctor first).
- If you cannot manage a meal, replace it with a nourishing drink, sweet or savoury, such as Build-Up or Complan.
- Try not to fill up on tea, coffee, squash and water as these are of poor nutritional value. Replace these with milk or a supplement drink, for example Ensure or Enlive. Ask your nurse or dietician for advice.
- Serve your meals on a small plate as large meals can put you off.

## Change of taste

It is common during or after chemotherapy treatment to have a change in taste. Some food and drink may taste metallic or bitter. This can be unpleasant but is only temporary.

- Try to eat more at the start of the day, as taste changes are often worse by the end of the day.
- If you have a strange taste in your mouth while the chemotherapy is being given, try sucking a boiled sweet or chewing some gum.
- Eat food cold or warm rather than hot.
- Stronger flavours are often best so try adding extra flavour to your food by using seasoning, herbs, spices, Oxo, Bovril or Marmite.
- Go along with food cravings and enjoy the foods you fancy.
- Not all foods will taste unpleasant so do not give up, try something else.

## Sore mouth and throat

It is common to suffer a sore or dry mouth and throat during chemotherapy treatment. Your doctor or nurse will tell you if this is likely to happen with your treatment. If your mouth becomes sore, your doctor can prescribe painkillers in a variety of forms.

Please ask for advice. You do not need to suffer pain or discomfort.

- Try to drink plenty to keep your mouth moist.
- Avoid dry, rough foods. Soft foods with lots of sauce are often best tolerated.
- It may be best to avoid spicy foods and foods that contain salt or lots of vinegar.



## Constipation

At some time you may have difficulty in opening your bowels (constipation). There are a number of reasons why you may become constipated, such as change of diet, not drinking enough, being less active than usual, taking painkillers, particularly Morphine, and some chemotherapy drugs.

Constipation can be uncomfortable and even painful if left untreated. Your doctor can prescribe tablets, liquid or suppositories, but you can also help yourself:

- Try to drink at least two litres of fluid each day. Fruit juices can be helpful.
- Try to eat more fibre: brown bread, potatoes, cereals, baked beans and other pulses, fresh fruit and vegetables. You can also add a tablespoon or two of natural bran to your meals.
- Try to reduce foods that can cause constipation, such as chocolate, cheese and eggs.
- Gentle exercise can help constipation although this may be the last thing you feel like doing at this time.

## Diarrhoea

At times you may have very loose or liquid stools (diarrhoea). There are a number of reasons why you may develop diarrhoea, for example, if your diet is more liquid than usual, if you have an infection, or some drugs can have this effect.

Diarrhoea can be uncomfortable and you may become dehydrated, losing body salts, if it is not treated. You may need drugs to 'bung you up' or antibiotics if you have an infection. You can also try to help yourself.

- Try to drink at least two litres a day or more if you can manage. It is best to avoid fizzy drinks and natural fruit juices.

- Eat less fibre in your diet.
- Pasteurised yoghurt may be helpful.
- Avoid rich, spicy, fried and fatty food.
- Try to eat foods high in protein and calories: white bread, rice, hard cheese and cooked eggs.
- It is often best to eat small frequent meals.
- If your bottom becomes sore, try using unscented 'wet wipes' instead of toilet paper.
- It is important to tell your doctor or nurse if your bottom becomes sore. They will be able to give you treatment to help your symptoms and prevent complications.
- Always wash your hands after opening your bowels.

## Alopecia

Not all chemotherapy drugs make the hair fall out (alopecia). Some drugs will make people lose all their hair, while others will only make the hair thin or patchy.

Your hair will not all fall out at once. It will be a slow process over several weeks starting about three to four weeks after chemotherapy. If your hair does fall out it will not be painful, although the scalp may be itchy and slightly tender. Other body hair may be affected, including eyebrows, eyelashes, under arm and pubic hair.

Your hair will grow back but the timing depends on the type of treatment you have, and how much and how often you have it. You can expect to have a full head of hair again about three to six months after chemotherapy has finished. When your hair does grow back, it may be a different texture, wavy or a different shade.

Losing your hair may be difficult to cope with both physically and emotionally. Hair is an important part of your appearance and losing it may evoke strong emotions such as anger and despair. Hair loss may act as a constant reminder that you have cancer and this may make you feel very low. These reactions are common and it often takes time and great strength to come to terms with them.

In addition to your own reactions to hair loss, you may also have to cope with other people's reactions too. People often stare as they feel uncomfortable and do not know what to say. If you feel able to, it may be helpful to talk about your hair loss, as people may then be able to offer you more support.

There are many practical ways to help manage hair loss. The following advice is aimed at making life a little easier during this time:

- Having your hair cut short before your hair starts to fall out will make it easier to manage and this may help you get used to having less hair.
- Use gentle products, such as baby shampoo, to prevent dryness of the hair and scalp.
- Use a soft hairbrush and brush your hair gently as your scalp may become tender.
- Avoid using too much heat, such as heated rollers or hair straighteners as this can dry the hair and make it break more easily. If you need to use a hair dryer use the cooler setting.
- Wearing a hairnet, soft cap or turban at night will stop hair falling out all over your pillow and bed.
- Cotton pillowcases may be more comfortable than nylon. Cotton is more absorbent if you sweat, causes less friction and will be less irritating to your scalp.
- If you lose your underarm hair, avoid using scented deodorants

as this may cause irritation. Try using baby powder or something similar.

- If your scalp becomes dry, flaky and itchy, use a gentle unscented moisturiser such as aqueous cream.
- Avoid using strong chemicals on your hair like perms or tints during treatment and for at least six months afterwards.
- Your hair usually protects your scalp from the sun so use a high factor sunscreen or wear a hat.
- You lose a great deal of body heat through your head so you will need to wear a hat and wrap up warm in the winter.
- You may find it useful to draw attention away from your hair by highlighting other features. For example, you may wish to wear a little more make-up to draw attention to your face or wear noticeable jewellery to emphasise your neckline. The clothes you wear can also draw people's attention away from your hair so try wearing brightly coloured shirts, ties or tops.

Another practical way of coping with hair loss is to wear a wig. Wigs used to be unnatural and uncomfortable to wear, but nowadays there are many different styles and colours for both men and women. Ask your nurse for advice. If you do not wish to wear a wig all or any of the time, you may wish to try other headwear. Hats are a practical, comfortable way to cover up and keep warm. Scarves and turbans are light and easy to wear and tend to be cheaper if you want to buy a selection.

## Fatigue

You may find that you feel very tired and lethargic. This is common and can be due to the cancer treatment or other factors such as not sleeping well. Feeling very tired or exhausted all or most of the time is called fatigue.

There are ways in which your doctors can help to reduce your fatigue, so it is important that you let them know how you are feeling. There are also some things that you can do to try to help yourself:

- Plan your day so that you have time to rest.
- Accept help from family and friends.
- Regular, gentle exercise may help to reduce the symptoms of fatigue.
- Try to keep to a regular sleeping pattern
- Talk through any worries with someone who you know will listen.

## Infertility and sex

Some chemotherapy drugs can make you infertile. Your doctor will discuss this with you before you start your treatment. We will offer men the opportunity to bank sperm for future use.

Fertility is not always affected so it is essential to avoid pregnancy during your treatment as the chemotherapy drugs can seriously harm your baby. Pregnancy testing is undertaken on all women of child bearing age, prior to chemotherapy.

Women taking the contraceptive pill or who have an IUD (intrauterine device) in place should discuss this with their doctor.

We advise you to use condoms to reduce the risk of getting an infection. If you have a low platelet count you may be prone to

bleeding and bruising during sexual activity.

Women may be offered medication to minimise side effects caused by hormonal changes which can lead to early menopause. Symptoms include hot flushes, irritability, sleep disturbances and vaginal dryness.

It is a common experience for people on chemotherapy to notice effects such as a reduced libido and sometimes impotence can occur. These effects can continue for a while after treatment is completed but usually resolve with time.

If you have any questions or concerns about any of these issues, please talk to your nurse.

We hope that you, your family and friends find this information helpful, but please do not hesitate to ask your doctor or nurse if you have any further questions or concerns.

## Additional information and support

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

Tel: 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm)

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

You may wish to read the following publications. All booklets are available free of charge from Macmillan by telephoning the number below. If you have access to a computer, all the information can be viewed on their website.

- Understanding Chemotherapy
- Coping with Fatigue
- Diet and the Cancer
- Coping with Hair Loss
- Recipes from Macmillan Cancer Support
- Work and Cancer
- Relationships, Sex and Fertility

## **Leukaemia Research**

43 Great Ormond Street  
London  
WC1N 3JJ

Telephone: 020 7405 0101

Website [www.lrf.org.uk](http://www.lrf.org.uk)

## **Leukaemia Research booklets:**

- Complementary and alternative medicine
- Dietary advice for patients with neutropenia

## **Maggie's Cancer Information Centre**

The Churchill Hospital  
Old Rd  
Headington  
Oxford OX3 7LJ

Telephone: 01865 225690 (Mon - Fri 9.30am - 4.30pm)

Website: [www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)

## **For benefits advice**

Telephone: 01865 225689

Email: [kdavies.oxcab@gmail.co.uk](mailto:kdavies.oxcab@gmail.co.uk)

## Notes

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221473** or email **PALSJR@orh.nhs.uk**

PI.3 Coping with the side effects of chemotherapy  
Ruth Hettler, Clinical Nurse Specialist  
Version 3.1, July 2011  
Review, July 2013  
Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust  
Oxford OX3 9DU  
[www.oxfordradcliffe.nhs.uk/patientinformation](http://www.oxfordradcliffe.nhs.uk/patientinformation)