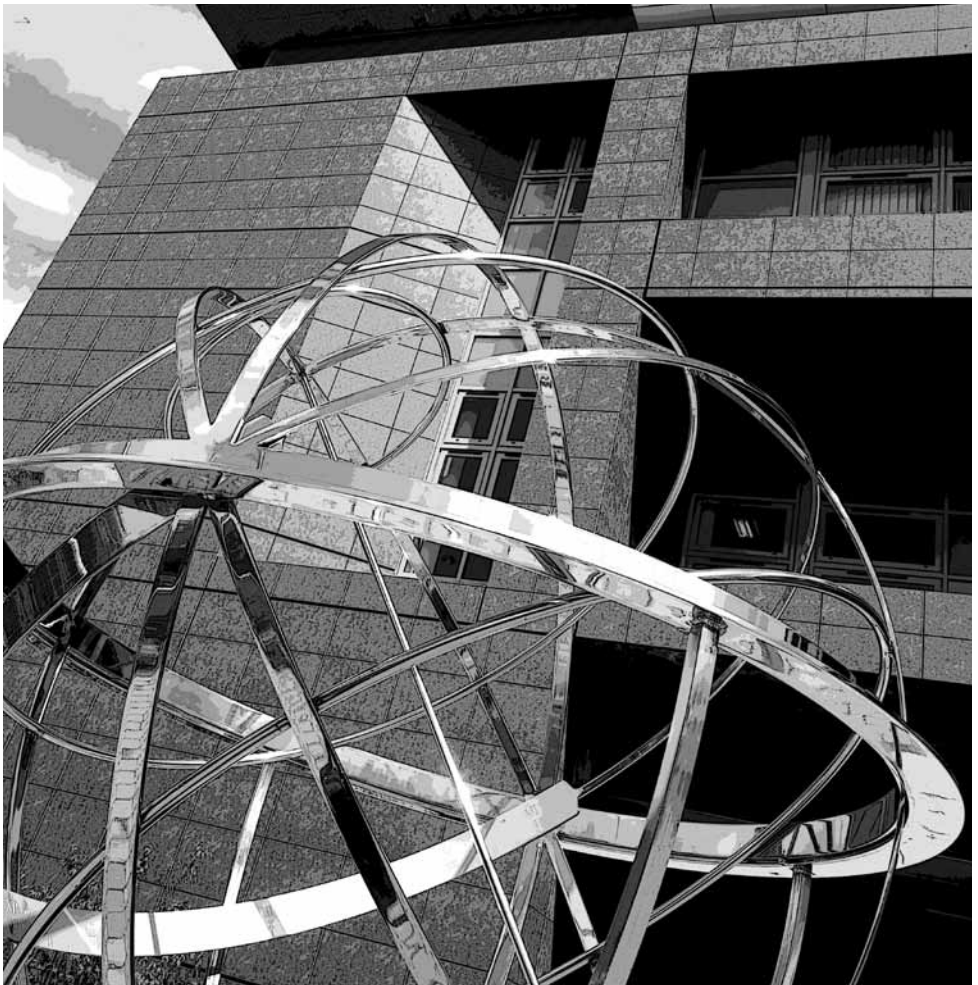


Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals **NHS**  
NHS Trust

Department of Clinical Haematology

# Chemotherapy

Information for patients



You may find this booklet helpful if you or someone close to you is going to have chemotherapy. It explains:

- what chemotherapy is
- how and where chemotherapy is given
- how chemotherapy works
- the side effects of chemotherapy.

There are many different chemotherapy regimes; this leaflet describes some 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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## What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to destroy cancer cells; these are sometimes called cytotoxic drugs.

Chemotherapy treatments vary, consisting sometimes of just one drug or several different drugs, which may be given over a few days or weeks. Your treatment will usually consist of several courses of chemotherapy and the regime you are given will depend upon the type of cancer that you have.

Your doctor and nurses will explain your treatment regime in detail to you before it is started.

## How will my chemotherapy be given to me?

Chemotherapy may be given by different routes, depending on the type of cancer and treatment you have.

Most commonly it is given by injection into a vein (intravenously). It can also be given by mouth (orally), by injection into a muscle (intramuscularly) or under the skin (subcutaneously).

In some cases chemotherapy may be injected into the fluid around the spinal cord (intrathecally). Whichever way the drugs are given, they are absorbed into the blood stream and carried around the body so that they can reach the cancer cells.

## Intravenous chemotherapy

Intravenous (IV) chemotherapy can sometimes be given via a 'drip' into a vein in your arm. In this case a fine tube (a cannula) will be inserted into the vein by a doctor or nurse. This will be removed before you go home.

If your veins are difficult to find, it may be necessary for you to have a Peripherally Inserted Central Venous Catheter (PICC). This is a very fine tube, which is placed into a vein in the crook of

your arm. Once in place it is secured and can remain in the vein for many months.

Alternatively, it may be necessary for you to receive your chemotherapy via a central line (sometimes known as a Hickman or Apheresis line). The line is 'tunnelled' so that it runs underneath the skin and ends in one of the large veins that lead to your heart. It comes out of the skin about 5-10cm below the collarbone.

A central line is put in while you are lightly sedated and can remain in place for many months whilst you have your treatment.

More information on Hickman and PICC lines can be found in the booklet in this series entitled 'Caring for your Central Line.'

## Oral chemotherapy

You may be given chemotherapy tablets to take home. Your doctor or nurse will tell you when to take them and give you written instructions. If you cannot take your tablets for any reason, please contact your doctor or nurse.

## Your treatment plan

Your treatment and how long it takes will depend on the type of cancer you have, the drugs you are receiving and the response of your cancer to the drugs.

Your doctor and nurse will explain the benefits of treatment as well as the possible side effects that you may experience. If you or your family have any questions, please do not be afraid to ask. Before starting your treatment, your doctor and nurse must make sure that you know enough to enable you to decide about your treatment. They will ask you to give your consent to the treatment and this will involve you reading and signing a consent form.

## Where is chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy can be given as an outpatient in the Day Treatment Unit or as an inpatient on the Haematology Ward. The type of chemotherapy you are having will determine whether or not you need to stay in hospital whilst you are having treatment.

If you are receiving chemotherapy in the Day Treatment Unit, it will usually be necessary for you to have blood tests and to see the doctor before you are given your treatment. This can all take time and it would therefore be a good idea to bring a book, magazine or newspaper with you on these visits.

Occasionally, your treatment may have to be delayed if your blood counts have not recovered enough since your last course of treatment. It may also be delayed if you are feeling unwell.

Your doctor will regularly check your response to the chemotherapy. The results from blood tests, X-rays and scans show how your cancer is responding to the treatment. Sometimes, it may be necessary to change your treatment plan. This may be because the cancer is not responding as quickly as your doctor had hoped. Changing the drugs may produce a better response.

Courses of chemotherapy can sometimes be worked around special occasions you may wish to attend, so that you are feeling as well as possible for them. This cannot be guaranteed but please ask your doctor if this can be arranged.

## How does chemotherapy work?

Cancer cells are abnormal, rapidly dividing cells, and chemotherapy drugs kill any rapidly dividing cells.

Unfortunately, the drugs cannot tell the difference between cancer cells and other rapidly dividing cells in your body such as hair follicles, skin, bone marrow and the lining of your mouth. This is what causes the side effects of the chemotherapy.

## Side effects of chemotherapy

Not everybody who receives chemotherapy will experience side effects; but you should remember that most side effects are temporary and will gradually disappear once your treatment has stopped.

There are many different chemotherapy regimes, some having specific side effects. The most common side effects are:

### **Hair loss**

Not all chemotherapy will cause your hair to fall out. If it does, hair loss usually starts within a few weeks of starting treatment.

Your eyelashes and eyebrows may be affected as well as your body hair. If you do lose your hair, remember that it is temporary and that hair usually starts to grow back about three to four weeks after your last course of treatment.

If you would like to order a wig, please mention it to your nurse as soon as possible so that it can be arranged before you lose your hair.

### **Sore mouth**

You may suffer from a sore mouth with ulcers and bleeding gums. If this happens, please tell your doctor or nurse. They can give you mouthwashes and painkillers to minimise your discomfort.

### **Skin Changes**

Whilst on treatment, your skin can become dry. You can keep your skin moisturised by using a scent free moisturiser, such as aqueous cream. If you notice a rash at all, please mention this to your doctor or nurse.

Chemotherapy treatment may also make your skin more sensitive to the sun. It is therefore important that you protect your skin from sunlight by wearing a hat, covering arms and legs and by using a high factor sunscreen on any exposed areas.

## **Taste changes**

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause your taste to change, but normal taste will return once your treatment is over.

## **Nausea and vomiting**

It is important to tell your nurse or doctor if you are feeling sick, as there is a wide range of anti-sickness drugs that can be prescribed by your doctor.

Please remember that not every chemotherapy drug will make you sick and in most cases anti-sickness medication will be given to you before you receive your chemotherapy.

## **Changes in bowel habit**

Chemotherapy drugs can affect the lining of your gut and can cause diarrhoea for a few days following your treatment. Alternatively, some drugs can cause constipation. If you are worried about diarrhoea or constipation please discuss this with your nurse or doctor.

## **Fatigue**

You may find that your treatment makes you feel very tired and lethargic. This is common and can be due to the treatment itself, or to other factors such as not sleeping well. It's important to rest when you do feel tired and to ask others for help. If you are regularly having problems sleeping, please discuss this with your doctor,

## **Infection**

As a result of the chemotherapy, your white blood cells will be destroyed, making you very susceptible to infection for approximately two to three weeks. (But this will vary depending on the type of chemotherapy you have received.)

You will be taught how to take your temperature and you should do this regularly at home. If it is above 37.5°C or you are feeling unwell, you should telephone the Haematology Ward (01865 235048) or Day Treatment Unit (01865 355554) straight away for advice.



## **Bleeding and bruising**

Along with your white blood cells, your platelets and red cells will also be reduced and so you may feel tired and find that you bruise more easily. If you notice any of these symptoms you should tell your doctor or nurse, as you may need a blood or platelet transfusion.

## **Infertility and sex**

Some chemotherapy can make you infertile. Your doctor and nurse will discuss this with you before starting your treatment. Men will be offered the opportunity to store sperm.

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 tests are undertaken on all women of child bearing age, prior to the commencement of 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.

Women may be offered medication to minimise side effects caused by hormonal changes which can lead to early menopause.

It is a common experience for people on chemotherapy to notice effects such as a reduced libido. Some men may experience impotence. These effects can continue for a while after treatment is completed but usually resolves with time.

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

## Your feelings

Everyone will vary in his or her reaction to the diagnosis of cancer and the treatment. There is no right or wrong way to respond.

Your doctors and nurses will be happy to spend time with you and your family discussing your thoughts and feelings. Please ask if you would like to see a counsellor for further support.

## Questions or concerns

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

You may now find it helpful to read the booklet in this series entitled "Coping with the Side Effects of Chemotherapy".

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

Tel: 0808 808 0000 (Monday-Friday, 9am - 8pm)

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

You may wish to read the following publications. All booklets are available from Macmillan free of charge, 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 cancer
- Coping with hair loss
- Work and cancer
- Relationships, sex and fertility

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

The Churchill Hospital

Old Rd

Headington

Oxford OX3 7LJ

Telephone: 01865 225690 (Monday-Friday, 9.30am - 4.30pm)

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

### **For benefits advice**

Telephone: 01865 225689

## 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**

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