

Receiving chemotherapy



What actually happens when I get my chemotherapy?

When you arrive for your appointment you will be welcomed by a chemotherapy nurse, who will go over your personal details. They will then check your height, weight, blood pressure and temperature. You will either sit in a big comfortable reclining chair or hospital bed to receive your chemotherapy.

Nearly all chemotherapy for lung cancer is given into a vein (intravenously), usually on the back of your hand or forearm. A small plastic needle (cannula) is put into the vein and attached to a drip. You will be given anti-sickness medicines through the drip before starting the chemotherapy.

Some chemotherapy takes quite a long time to receive, so remember to take items such as: a book, magazine or portable music player with earphones with you to keep you occupied. There will be other people receiving chemotherapy at the same time as you, so often there is an opportunity to chat with other patients.

Once the chemotherapy is finished you will be given tablets to take at home to prevent any sickness over the next few days.

"I expected to have to lie still in bed for the whole day, but actually, even with the drip in, I was able to wander down to the day room and watch telly."

Eileen

Can I bring a relative or friend with me?

Yes, if you can, bring someone with you to your hospital appointment. They usually will be able to sit with you and keep you company while you receive your chemotherapy, although this does vary from unit to unit.

Can I drive after receiving chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy affects people in different ways. Some people feel all right and able to drive after receiving chemotherapy. Others may experience some side-effects and not be able to drive straight away. It is best not to drive to your first chemotherapy appointment and see how you feel after receiving treatment.

If you need help with travelling, your lung cancer nurse specialist may be able to help arrange transport for you.

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TOP TIP

Wear comfortable clothing with either short or loose sleeves when you go for your chemotherapy and take your slippers with you.

Can I eat or drink while I get my chemotherapy?

Yes, you will be encouraged to drink plenty and eat as normal while receiving your chemotherapy. Snacks and drinks will be supplied by the hospital. If you have brought a friend or relative with you they will have to supply their own refreshments.

I have heard that chemotherapy has very bad side-effects. Is this true and is there anything that can be done about them?

All forms of cancer treatment have side-effects of one sort or another. Most people have some side-effects from having chemotherapy. Most of these side-effects are manageable and ease with time. It is important to discuss side-effects with your cancer doctor or lung cancer nurse specialist as they will be able to help.

Common Side-effect

Practical advice

Feeling or being sick

There are very powerful anti-sickness drugs, which can help reduce sickness in most patients. Remember to take the tablets for sickness that the hospital has given you. **If they don't work let your cancer doctor know, as there is usually an alternative.**

Extreme tiredness

This is normal. Although it is important to rest, a small amount of regular exercise will also help reduce your tiredness. If you feel breathless, your legs ache or you are concerned that you feel too tired, ask your GP or hospital team for advice.

Complete hair loss

Although distressing, it is temporary and does not happen with all chemotherapy drugs. If you notice your hair starting to fall out, wear a hairnet at night and a hat/scarf during the day. Don't brush your hair too much or use hair colourants/rollers. **Most hospitals will supply advice on how to get a good quality wig of your choice.**

Fever and low white blood count

It is important to realise that you are at higher risk than normal of getting an infection which your body can't fight on its own because your immune system is affected by the treatment. Therefore, if anyone you know has an obvious infection (for example: flu, chickenpox, shingles), it is best to stay away.

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Infection of the blood (neutropenic sepsis)

You are at an increased risk of getting an infection of the blood (neutropenic sepsis) when you are receiving chemotherapy. This can be very serious and needs treated **straight away**. It is very important that you look out for the following:

- **Temperature 37.5C or higher.**
- Uncontrollable shivering or sweating.
- A very sore throat.
- Sickness and diarrhoea.
- A change in your mental state, such as confusion or disorientation.
- Fast breathing.
- Fast heart rate.
- Dizziness.

You might not have any symptoms other than an increased temperature. Check your temperature often with a thermometer. If you have any of the above symptoms please contact the hospital straight away.

My mouth is sore - is this normal?

Chemotherapy can cause the lining of the mouth to get sore, often with mouth ulcers. Keep your mouth clean and fresh, with regular tooth/ denture brushing with a soft toothbrush. If you have white patches over the lining of your mouth or your tongue you may have a fungal mouth infection called thrush. This is quite common and you should contact your GP or hospital who will prescribe an anti-fungal medicine to treat it.

TOP TIP

Drinking pineapple juice can ease the pain of mouth ulcers.

“The third day after chemo I felt better and wanted something to eat, I didn't do too much and gradually got back to how I felt before.”

Kenny

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Do the side-effects ease with time?

Yes, usually they do ease with time, although in some patients they last longer or start later. If you are going to feel sick it is usually within the first week after treatment. White blood cells and platelets reach their lowest point 10-15 days after treatment. Often the only sign that this has happened is a feeling of tiredness when even the smallest task might feel like a chore. This is also the time when you are most at risk of picking up infections. In general side-effects usually begin to reduce by the third week after chemotherapy and you should start to feel better. This is your body recovering in time for the next treatment. Unfortunately, some side-effects, for example, tiredness, bad taste in the mouth and tingling in the fingers and toes, may continue for some time after treatment.

How do the doctors know if the chemotherapy is working?

It can be difficult to measure exactly how well it is working, although usually an assessment will be made at some point during your treatment (usually after two-three courses of chemotherapy). Usually this will be done by chest x-ray and/or CT scan. If you are receiving radiotherapy at the same time as chemotherapy the scan is usually done around two months after completion of treatment. This allows the combination of treatments to finish working and the scan to be more accurate.

If your symptoms have improved this may also suggest that the treatment is working, for example, less cough or breathlessness. If there is evidence that your cancer is responding to the chemotherapy then treatment will continue (as long as you are not having side-effects which you can't cope with). If there is evidence that your cancer is not responding then it is important to know this, so that a decision on an alternative treatment can be made. Sometimes there will be no change in the state of your tumour when the x-ray or scan has been done. However, the growth of the tumour may have been stopped or slowed by chemotherapy. This is a positive response - especially if you feel better. Chemotherapy may continue to delay the growth for some time.

"I kept a diary between chemo sessions. It gave me great comfort during treatment to read back about the previous session and how things got better."

Val

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Should I change my diet while I'm having chemotherapy?

It is quite common to lose your appetite while having chemotherapy and your sense of taste may also be affected. You could find that you have a metallic taste in your mouth or perhaps no taste at all. However, if you are concerned that you are not eating or drinking enough tell your cancer doctor, as there are dietary supplements available on prescription.

The following tips may help to make foods taste better:

- Seasonings will help to add flavour to your food.
- Marinating food before cooking may help improve flavour, as may pickles and adding sauces to cold meats.
- Sharp tasting foods such as fruit juices and fresh pineapple will leave a refreshing taste in your mouth. **However, avoid grapefruit as it can interfere with some chemotherapy drugs.**
- Fizzy drinks or lemon (or other fruit) teas may provide a pleasant tasting change from tea and coffee.
- Cold food sometimes tastes better than hot food.
- Avoid strong smelling and fried foods.
- Eat small meals and snacks regularly throughout the day, rather than large ones only at meal times.
- Avoid drinking too much liquid before eating, as this will fill you up.

You will be given a contact number to phone if you experience difficulties with side-effects. This number should be used at times when it may be difficult to contact your lung cancer nurse specialist or cancer doctor, such as during the night or at the weekend.

GIVING HELP AND HOPE

The charity has two aims:

Supporting people living with lung cancer - Working closely with lung cancer nurses, we provide information, run lung cancer support groups and offer telephone and online support. Our patient grants offer some financial help to people affected by lung cancer.

Saving lives - We fund lung cancer research, campaign for better treatment and care for people who have lung cancer, and raise awareness of the importance of early diagnosis. Our lung cancer prevention work helps people to quit smoking and encourages young people not to start smoking.

Call us on 0333 323 7200 (option 2)

This information has been taken from the following sources:

Lung cancer—answering your questions: Chemotherapy for lung cancer 2014