

WHAT IS CHEMOTHERAPY?

Chemotherapy is the use of drugs (anti-neoplastic agents) to treat cancer.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF CHEMOTHERAPY?

Chemotherapy can be used to cure or control the spread of the cancer. It can also be used in a palliative manner to control the symptoms of cancer. Finally chemotherapy can be used to make cancer more sensitive to radiotherapy.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Anticancer drugs attack rapidly growing cells. They work by directly destroying the cancer cells or depriving them of essential substances, or by blocking them at specific points in their cell life cycle. Cancer drugs are sometimes more effective if given in combination.

HOW IS IT GIVEN?

Chemotherapy is usually given intravenously (in a vein). In some cases it can be given intraperitoneally (in the belly) or intramuscularly. We recommend that patients receiving intravenous chemotherapy have a port placed, while patients receiving intraperitoneal chemotherapy must have a port placed — more on this later. Most treatments can be given in the office, rarely certain drug regimens require hospitalization overnight or for several days.

Chemotherapy treatments are given weekly or every three to four weeks. The exact schedule depends on the drugs and how your body responds to them. Sometimes it may be necessary to delay

treatment until you recover from the side effects. The duration of treatment varies based on the cancer, the goal of the treatment and your own response. We will outline the schedule and duration of the treatment initially and we will discuss any changes in the plan.

WHICH DRUGS WILL I GET?

Different cancers respond better to certain drugs. The treatment you get will depend on the type of cancer as well as the site it originated from. The choice of drugs can also depend on medical conditions you may have such as diabetes, heart, liver or kidney disease. We will outline your best treatment options.

DOES CHEMOTHERAPY HURT?

No, chemotherapy is not painful.

CAN I WORK DURING CHEMOTHERAPY?

Many patients are able to continue to work during treatment. Chemotherapy can cause you to feel tired and drained. The first few days after treatment are the toughest. Before you return to work it is important to plan ahead:

- What you will tell your co-workers about your condition.
- Set realistic work expectations.
- Discuss your situation with your supervisor. If possible, arrange flexible work hours.
- Federal law may provide you with certain other job protection.

If necessary, our office can assist you in applying for disability.

SHOULD I TAKE MY OTHER MEDICINES?

It is important to continue your usual medication. Some medicines may interfere with chemotherapy. It is crucial to tell us about any medicine you take including Aspirin. Also let us know about changes in your medication.

DO I NEED TO EAT A SPECIAL DIET?

Eating a well balanced diet while you are receiving chemotherapy is critical. You should continue to eat foods from all major food groups. However, if you become neutropenic —have a low white blood cell count—we will instruct you to avoid fresh fruits and vegetables (cooked fruits/vegetables are OK).

For the first two to three days following treatment you might want to avoid greasy foods or meals with strong aromas. If you experience nausea or an unsettled stomach you might find it easier to eat “cold” meals. It may also be helpful to supplement your diet with *Slimfast*, *Ensure* or *Sustacal*.

SIDE EFFECTS:

Although chemotherapy has extensive potential side effects, it is important to remember that these are just possibilities. Many patients do *not* experience any side effects.

- Nausea/Vomiting: once a common side effect can now be controlled with medicine like Kytril or Zofran. Make sure you take your medicines. Eat cold foods that are non-irritating or acidic.
- Fatigue: chemo or radiotherapy can cause fatigue and weakness. Occasionally it may be related to anemia. It goes away once the treatment is stopped. If your

fatigue is related to anemia, certain medicines may help.

- **Hair Loss:** a common side effect with some drugs. It starts gradually after the first treatment. Be prepared with a hairpiece or turban. It is best to get your hairpiece before you lose your hair so you can match the color. Your hair **will** grow back once the treatment is done.
- **Blood Counts:** chemotherapy can cause anemia, leukopenia or thrombocytopenia (low red/ white blood cells or platelets). This is a common but transient effect. Your body will recover. We may start you on medicines to reduce these problems.
- **Skin changes:** Some patients experience redness, itching, dryness or peeling of the skin. Your nails may become darkened or brittle.
- **Nerve and muscle effects:** while receiving chemotherapy you may develop a peripheral neuropathy. A condition where you may feel numbness/tingling or weakness in the hands and feet. This frequently resolves after treatment, however, it may be permanent. It is important to let us know if you experience these symptoms or if you have problems buttoning your clothes or walking.
- **Heart /Lung effects:** Rarely certain drugs can damage the heart muscle or lung function. If you are on these drugs, we will assess your heart/lung function periodically, but you must tell us if you become short of breath or have swelling in the feet.
- **Kidney/bladder effects:** some drugs can transiently or permanently damage the bladder or kidneys. We will monitor your kidney function but it is important to let us know if you have frequent or painful

urination, urgency to urinate, reddish or bloody urine.

- **Constipation:** is a common side effect of chemotherapy. If this happens, increase the fiber/fruits in your diet and use laxatives.

CENTRAL VENOUS CATHETERS:

Central venous catheters or ports are small thin tubes that are inserted in a large vein in your body. These catheters are tunneled under the skin and frequently have a small container through which the chemotherapy is given. These catheters are designed to last for a long period of time. Although they are not necessary, we strongly encourage their use. They offer significant comfort for you: Chemotherapy and fluids are given through them, thereby reducing the chance of the drugs “leaking” under the skin. They eliminate the need for repeated needle sticks for IV access or blood draws. There is a small risk with the initial placement of the catheter including: infection, bleeding puncture of the lung, migration of the catheter.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Feel free to ask us any questions you may have or consult the informational booklets in our office. For additional information you can contact the following organizations on the Internet:

Society of Gynecologic Oncologists

www.sgo.org

American Cancer Society www.cancer.org

Women’s Cancer Network www.wcn.org

National Cancer Institute www.nci.nih.gov

CHEMOTHERAPY AND You:

A GUIDE TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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