

Helping patients on types of
cancer treatment in the pharmacy

Understanding chemotherapy



What it is

Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment where medication is used to destroy cancer cells. There are lots of different chemotherapy medications, this means that treatment may involve patients taking one medication, or multiple medications in combination, depending on their diagnosis. While all chemotherapy medications are different, most work by disrupting the normal way in which cells grow and divide.

Chemotherapy is often given in regular scheduled sessions called cycles. These allow patients to recover from the side effects of treatment, while maintaining exposure of the cancer cells to the chemotherapy medication. However, some oral chemotherapy medications are given every day without a break. The frequency with which treatment is given will vary depending on each patient's diagnosis.

How it works

Our body contains billions of cells that form our organs and other tissues. Cancer cells multiply quickly – more quickly than most of the other cells in our body. Chemotherapies are medications that are toxic to multiplying cells, whether they are cancerous or healthy. Chemotherapy involves administering these toxic medications to patients in controlled doses. As cancer cells often multiply more quickly than healthy cells, the chemotherapy medications impact these cells to a greater extent. Cancer cells are often less able to repair the damage caused by chemotherapy medications, making them more susceptible to the effects of treatment when compared to normal, healthy cells.

Chemotherapy medications are given to people for a variety of different purposes, such as: to cure them of their cancer, to shrink down a tumour prior to surgery, to reduce the risk of their cancer from coming back after surgery, to reduce symptoms associated with cancer or give someone with incurable cancer more time.

Potential side effects

The side effects of chemotherapy depend on what chemotherapy medications patients received, the dose administered and whether they were used alone, or in combination. While all chemotherapy medications have different side effects, there are a number of common effects which patients may experience.

These include nausea, hair loss, sore/itchy/dry skin, tiredness, diarrhoea or constipation. Patients often have an increased risk of developing infections due to suppression of their immune system.

The full Let's Communicate Cancer course is available by clicking [here](#)

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Support in assessing the severity of side effects, treatment recommendations and referral criteria

Guidance regarding assessment of the severity of side effects, alongside OTC treatment recommendations and referral criteria are available in factsheet series 2. These factsheets cover the following topics: diarrhoea, constipation, nausea and vomiting, peripheral neuropathy, rashes and mucositis.

- diarrhoea
- constipation
- nausea and vomiting
- peripheral neuropathy
- rashes
- mucositis



Please be aware that comprehensive information regarding individual cancer therapies is available from the **Macmillan website**

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