

Chemotherapy



This information sheet has been written to help you understand more about chemotherapy and the support and information your doctors, nurses and the Cancer Society can offer you. We hope it answers some of the questions you may have before and during treatment. You will be given more information when you have treatment. We can't advise about the best treatment for you personally. You need to discuss this with your own doctors.

The words in bold in the text are explained in the section “What does this word mean?” which is at the end of the Information Sheet.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the body's **cells**. It starts in our **genes**. Our bodies are constantly making new cells: to enable us to grow, to replace worn-out cells, or to heal damaged cells after an injury. This process is controlled by certain genes. All cancers are caused by damage to these genes. This damage usually happens during our lifetime, although a small number of people inherit a damaged gene from a parent when they are born. Normally, cells grow and multiply in an orderly way. However, damaged genes can cause them to behave abnormally. They may grow into a lump which is called a **tumour**.

Tumours can be **benign** (not cancerous) or **malignant** (cancerous).

Benign tumours do not spread outside their normal boundary to other parts of the body.

A malignant tumour is made up of cancer cells. When it first develops, this malignant tumour may be confined to its original site, a cancer in situ (or **carcinoma in situ**). If these cells are not treated they may spread beyond their normal boundaries and into surrounding tissues (invasive cancer).

Sometimes cells move away from the original (**primary**) cancer through the blood or lymph node systems and invade other organs. When these cells reach a new site they may continue to grow and form another tumour at that site. This is called a secondary cancer.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the treatment of cancer using anti-cancer (cytotoxic) drugs. The aim is to kill cancer cells while doing the least possible damage to normal cells.

How will my doctors decide on the type of chemotherapy?

The type of treatment that your specialist chooses for you depends on what type of cancer you have, how far it has spread and your general health. Chemotherapy has been used for many years, and new and better treatments are being discovered all the time, so your doctors will select the best treatment for you and your type of cancer. Because everyone is different, treatments are designed for the individual.

Talking to doctors

You may want to see your doctor a few times before making a final decision on treatment. It is often difficult to take everything in, and you may need to ask the same questions more than once. You always have the right to find out what a suggested treatment means for you, and the right to accept or refuse it.

Will I have to stay in hospital?

Most people have their treatment as an outpatient. Usually you have to spend a few hours at the hospital for each treatment.

You will have a blood test first, and your doctors must wait for the result to check that your blood count is okay before they can give you the treatment. Some people stay in hospital overnight or longer depending on the treatment.

Side effects

The side effects that you might experience depend on the drugs you receive and how they affect you. Ask your specialist or nurse what to expect and how to deal with it.

Most side effects are only temporary. They are not experienced between treatments and usually disappear shortly after the treatment stops. However, some side effects are permanent.

Infection and fever

If fever develops (if your temperature is 38 degrees or more) or you feel unwell, even with a normal temperature, don't wait to see what happens – take action quickly. Contact your cancer doctor or nurse and follow the advice given.

Bruising or bleeding

Contact your cancer doctor or nurse immediately if you have any unexplained bleeding or bruising.

Feeling sick or vomiting

If you do feel sick you'll find that it usually occurs several hours after treatment and may last for a few hours. It is important to take your anti-sickness medication exactly as prescribed. If you continue to feel sick or vomit for longer than 24 hours, contact your oncology nurse or doctor.

Sore or dry mouth or throat

If your mouth is very sore or if you get ulcers or thrush (a white coating in the mouth) see your doctor or nurse straight away for advice on treatment.

It is important to keep your teeth, gums and mouth very clean during your treatment to help stop infections. The nurses can show you how to do this. Use a very soft toothbrush or a cotton bud for your teeth and gums, and avoid vigorous or rough brushing.

Hair loss

Some people don't lose their hair, while others lose all their head and body hair. Whether this happens to you depends on what drugs you are given. Ask your specialist if you are likely to lose your hair. Your hair will grow back again when your treatment stops. It takes between four and 12 months to grow back a full head of hair.

Many people find losing their head hair very upsetting. Try to remember that it will grow back. Until it does, you might want to wear a wig. Spend some time choosing one that suits you. The Government helps pay for the cost of a wig. You must get a certificate from your doctor that states you are entitled to one.

How will I know my treatment is working?

You may be able to tell if your treatment is working by improvement in symptoms or by noting a decrease in the size of a lump that you can see and or feel. Sometimes only your doctors can tell you whether the chemotherapy is getting rid of the cancer or not. They do this by talking

to you, examining you and carrying out blood tests, scans and so on.

Sometimes it is necessary to have many tests during treatment to see how the treatment is working.

What happens when the treatment ends?

As during your treatment, only do what you feel comfortable doing. You may be able to return to your normal life immediately, or build up to it a bit at a time. You may be going on to another form of treatment and so need to take it easier for a bit longer. Continue to ask for help if you need it. It is always better to ask than to do too much.

Relationships and Sexuality

The side effects of chemotherapy may mean that you do not feel like having sex because you feel unattractive, too tired, nauseous or are in pain.

It is important to keep communication open with partners – for both of you to share your fears and needs. You may be able to find creative ways to meet these needs and cope with the fears, identifying possible solutions that suit you.

Support

Emotional support

It may be helpful to talk about your feelings with your partner, family members, friends, or with a counsellor, social worker, psychologist or your religious/spiritual adviser. Talking to other people with cancer may also help.

Talking to children

How much you tell children will depend on how old they are. Young children need to know that it is not their fault. They also need to know that you may have to go into hospital. Slightly older children can probably understand a simple explanation of what is wrong. Adolescent children can understand much more.

All children need to know what will happen to them while you are in hospital – who will look after them and how their daily life will be affected.

Information and Support

The Cancer Society provides confidential information and support. Talk about your concerns and needs with experienced cancer nurses. Call **0800 CANCER (226237)** or phone your local Cancer Society.

It is important to let your doctor know if you are taking any complementary or alternative therapies because some treatments may be harmful if they are taken at the same time as conventional treatments.

Interpreting services

New Zealand's Health and Disability Code states that everyone has the right to have an interpreter present during a medical consultation. Family or friends may assist if you and your doctor do not speak the same language, but you can also ask your doctor to provide an interpreter if using family members is inappropriate or not possible.

Diet and food safety

A balanced nutritious diet will help to keep you as well as possible and cope with any side effects of treatment. The Cancer Society's booklet called *Eating Well/Kia Pai te Kai* gives useful eating advice and recipes. Phone your local Cancer Society for a copy of this booklet, call **0800 CANCER (226237)** for a copy or download it from our website at www.cancernz.org.nz. The hospital will also have a dietitian who can help.

Questions you may wish to ask

Ask as many questions as you want to. It's easy to forget the questions you want to ask when you see your specialist or nurse, so write them down as you think of them and take your list with you to your appointment.

What does that word mean?

benign – a tumour that is not malignant, not cancerous and won't spread to another part of your body.

carcinoma in situ – a malignant tumour that is confined to its original site.

cells – the 'building blocks' of the body. A human is made of millions of cells, which are adapted for different functions. Cells are able to reproduce themselves exactly, unless they are abnormal or damaged, as are cancer cells.

genes – the tiny factors that govern the way the body's cells grow and behave. Each person has a set of many thousands of genes inherited from both parents. Genes are found in every cell of the body.

malignant – a tumour that is cancerous and likely to spread if it is not treated.

primary – a malignant tumour starts in one site of the body where it is known as the primary tumour.

tumour – a swelling or lump. Tumours can be benign (not cancerous) or malignant (cancerous).

Suggested websites

The following websites have information on chemotherapy:

Cancer BACKUP (UK)
www.cancerbackup.org.uk

Cancer Council of Victoria (Australia)
www.cancervic.org.au

National Cancer Institute (USA) www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo

The suggested websites are not maintained by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. We only suggest sites we believe offer credible and responsible information, but we cannot guarantee that the information on such websites is correct, up-to-date or evidence-based medical information.

This information sheet was reviewed in December 2006 by the Cancer Society. The Cancer Society's information sheets are reviewed every two years by cancer doctors, specialist nurses and other relevant health professionals to ensure the medical information is reliable, evidence-based and up-to-date. The sheets are also reviewed by consumers to ensure they meet the needs of readers.

This information sheet was reviewed by Dr Peter Dady, Blood and Cancer Centre at Wellington Hospital; Dr Mark Jeffery at Christchurch Hospital and the experienced cancer nurses of the Cancer Society of New Zealand. It will be reviewed again in December 2007.

For cancer information and support
phone **0800 CANCER (226 237)**
www.cancernz.org.nz