

Coping with the Side Effects of Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy: Fever, Nausea, and Vomiting



This Information Sheet offers suggestions that may help you cope with side effects during treatment for cancer.

If you are having treatment, you may not feel well. Treatment (including surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy) can cause a variety of symptoms, including fatigue, nausea, vomiting, fever and infections. While some of these side effects are unpleasant, others can pose risks to your health and recovery.

There are some general guidelines that you can keep in mind if you are experiencing any of these symptoms.

Fever and infection

This is much more common with chemotherapy than it is with radiation therapy:

- If having chemotherapy or radiation therapy, watch for fever and infection.

A fever can be a sign that your body has an infection. Fevers can also cause other problems, such as chills, shivering and headaches. It is important, therefore, to investigate the cause of infection and to treat it appropriately. It is also possible to have an infection but to not have a fever – just to feel unwell. In either case, contact your doctor immediately.

If fever develops (if your temperature is 38 degrees or over) 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.

Be Careful Not to Believe These “Myths” About Fever.

1. “Fevers come and go – it’s best just to let them run their course.” FALSE.

Fevers are always an indication that something is wrong, and should be treated and reported. If they get too high, they can lead to dehydration and seizures. When someone is undergoing chemotherapy or radiation therapy, fevers often indicate infection, which is serious and requires medical attention.

2. “Fevers help burn up whatever is wrong.” FALSE.

High fevers do not destroy bacteria that cause infection. This is why your doctor or health care team will treat both the fever and the possible infection – if your white blood cell count is low, your body will not be able to fight off the infection on its own.

It is important to remember that the risks of infection and fever do not go away as soon as treatment ends. The amount of time a patient is at risk for infection varies greatly. It is important for you to ask your doctor or health care team about this.

Nausea and vomiting

Many people are aware that nausea and vomiting are common side effects of chemotherapy. With radiation therapy, nausea and vomiting may occur depending on the site of the treatment. Depending on your type of treatment, you may experience them together, separately, at different times throughout your illness, or not at all.

In the last few years there have been many advances in controlling nausea and vomiting.

There are also things you can do to help limit nausea:

- **Follow instructions for anti-nausea medicine.** If nausea persists contact your oncology nurse or Cancer Centre. Remember to keep all medications out of the reach of children. Check with your doctor or nurse whether you can drive while on this medication.
- **Get plenty of rest.** Some patients report that resting can help them get over feelings of nausea. Also, some anti-nausea drugs are designed to make you sleepy and rest through a period of nausea.
- **Relax and try to distract yourself.** Watching TV, listening to the radio or any other activity that relaxes you will help you feel less affected by nausea.
- **Wear loose-fitting clothes.** Tight sweaters, shirts or dresses, especially around the waist or neck, can add to feelings of stomach upset.
- **Rinsing can help eliminate a bad taste in your mouth,** and you should not eat strong or spicy foods if you think you may experience nausea.
- **See the Cancer Society booklet *Eating Well/Kia Pai te Kai*** for further hints on managing nausea. Contact your local Cancer Society or phone **0800 CANCER (226 237)** to receive a copy of this booklet.
- **Try taking small sips of fluids or sucking on ice cubes an hour or so after being sick.** This can help settle your stomach.
- **Crackers or toast can help.** Because they are mild, these types of foods can put something back into your stomach, usually without upset.

- **Have another person stay with you.** Talking and getting encouragement from someone else can be a great help in feeling better.

Be Careful not to believe these Myths about nausea and vomiting

1. **“All radiation and chemotherapy treatments make you feel sick.” FALSE.**

Each person reacts differently to cancer therapy. Some people experience nausea, some do not. Symptoms can come and go throughout treatment.

2. **“There are no medications to get rid of nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy and radiation therapy. The ones that are available cause side effects.” FALSE.**

Medicines are available to help, and many have few side effects. These medicines are called anti-emetics. Ask your doctor about these. Remember to take your medicine as prescribed.

3. **“Getting sick means the cancer treatment is working.” FALSE.**

Whether the treatment makes you sick or nauseous has no bearing on its effectiveness. Again, each person reacts differently to treatment. Some do not get ill at all.

Nausea and vomiting can be an indication of a serious problem, especially if they interfere with your ability to take oral medication or cause bleeding or pain. Nausea and vomiting may be due to causes other than chemotherapy or radiation therapy and should be investigated by your doctor or nurse.