About chemotherapy
A Quick Guide

Contents
This is a brief summary of ‘About chemotherapy’ from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

• Chemotherapy and cancer
• How chemotherapy works
• When chemotherapy is used
• Where you have chemotherapy
• Chemotherapy drug names
• Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

You may have treatment with a single chemotherapy drug or a combination of drugs. You may have chemotherapy on its own or with other treatments.

For some types of cancer, people have high dose chemotherapy treatment, with a drip (infusion) of stem cells or bone marrow cells afterwards. This is called a bone marrow transplant or stem cell transplant.

How chemotherapy kills cancer cells
Chemotherapy kills cells that are in the process of splitting into 2 new cells. This is how normal body tissues grow. But cancer cells divide much more often than normal cells, so they are more likely to be killed by chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy kills dividing cells by damaging the part of the control centre inside each cell that makes it divide. Some drugs interrupt the chemical processes involved in cell division.

Chemotherapy causes side effects because it affects healthy body tissues where cells are constantly growing and dividing. These tissues include the skin, bone marrow (the spongy substance in the centre of the bones where red and white blood cells and platelets are made), hair follicles and lining of the digestive system. Normal cells can replace or repair cells that are damaged by chemotherapy. So side effects caused by damage to healthy body tissues usually go away once the treatment ends.

How you have chemotherapy
The main ways you can have chemotherapy are as an injection, a drip into the bloodstream, or tablets or capsules. The chemotherapy drugs circulate all round the body in the bloodstream to reach the cancer cells. Doctors call this systemic treatment.
How well chemotherapy works
You may have chemotherapy to try to cure your cancer or you may have it to control the cancer. The chance of the chemotherapy curing your cancer depends on the type of cancer you have. You may have chemotherapy on its own or with other treatments, such as surgery or radiotherapy.

Even if a cancer can’t be cured, you may have chemotherapy to help control a cancer by shrinking it, or to relieve symptoms.

When chemotherapy is used
You may have chemotherapy

• To shrink a cancer before surgery or radiotherapy (neoadjuvant treatment)
• To try to stop cancer coming back after surgery or radiotherapy (adjuvant treatment)
• As a treatment on its own in cancers that are very sensitive to chemotherapy
• To treat cancer that has spread from where it first started

Sometimes people have chemotherapy at the same time as radiotherapy. This is called chemoradiation. It can help the radiotherapy to work, but can also increase side effects.

Types of chemotherapy
Different chemotherapy drugs work on different types of cancer. The chemotherapy drugs you have are specific to the type of cancer you have.

Why chemotherapy may not be suitable for you
Some types of cancers are not suitable to chemotherapy, and so your doctor won’t recommend it to treat them.

Where you have chemotherapy
Where you have chemotherapy depends on the type of chemotherapy and what care and support you need when you are having it.

Chemotherapy at home
You may have chemotherapy at home if

• You are taking tablets or capsules
• Your hospital or private healthcare company has home chemotherapy nurses
• You are having continuous, low dose chemotherapy through a pump that you can wear at home

Chemotherapy at the hospital
If you are having chemotherapy into a vein you usually have it either at a chemotherapy day clinic or as an inpatient. Having chemotherapy in the day clinic can take anything from a few minutes to a few hours.

Some chemotherapy treatments mean a short stay in hospital. This is usually because

• You need to have the treatment slowly
• You need to have extra fluids through the drip along with the drug
• You need to be monitored during the treatment

If you are having high dose chemotherapy treatment you may need to stay in hospital for longer, perhaps for a few weeks. This is because the treatment is more intensive and has more side effects. Staying in hospital means that your doctor or nurse can pick up and treat any problems quickly, including infections.
Chemotherapy drug names
Drugs have a generic name and may also have one or more brand names. The generic name is the chemical name of the drug, for example, paracetamol. The brand or trade name is the name given to the drug by the company that makes it, such as Panadol or Calpol.

If a drug is made by more than one company, it will have more than one brand name.

Combination chemotherapy names
Doctors often treat cancer with a combination of chemotherapy drugs. And sometimes also with other medicines, such as steroids or biological therapies. The drug combinations they use are often named with a word made up from the first letters of the drug names. This type of made up word is called an acronym. Ask your doctor what each letter stands for and get them to write down the individual names of each drug. This will make it easier for you to find information about them.

What to ask your doctor about chemotherapy
Some questions you might ask your doctor

- Why are you recommending chemotherapy for me?
- How successful is it for my type of cancer?
- What is the aim of the chemotherapy?
- What are the benefits of this chemotherapy?
- What are the side effects?
- What will happen if I don’t have the chemotherapy?
- What will my treatment involve?
- Where will it be given?
- How long will each treatment take?
- How long will I be in hospital?
- How many treatments will I have?
- How long will my treatment last?
- Will I have just one drug or a combination of drugs?
- What drug or drugs will I take?
- Are there any other drugs that could be used that may cause fewer side effects?
- Are there any new drugs going through clinical trials that I could have?
- Will I have any other treatment for my cancer along with the chemotherapy?
- Is there any alternative to chemotherapy for my type of cancer?
- If I have a problem or I feel unwell from the treatment who do I contact?
For more information, visit our website http://www.cruk.org/cancerhelp

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

Adapted from Cancer Research UK’s Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in December 2013. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. Copyright Cancer Research UK 2013. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and in the Isle of Man (1103)