



The Chemotherapy Experience

More than half of people diagnosed with cancer are treated with chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is a drug that is given to stop cancer cells from growing or to kill them. The type of chemotherapy given depends on the type of cancer the person has been diagnosed, the stage of the cancer and the overall health of the individual. While chemotherapy is a very common treatment option, the experience of chemotherapy is unique to each person. The goal of therapy is to make the experience as effective, timely and problem free as possible.

Chemotherapy is given to kill or damage fast growing cells. While chemotherapy kills these cancer cells, it also affects other healthy cells. Healthy cells are in the skin, hair follicles, bone marrow where red and white blood cells are made and the gastrointestinal tract, in the mouth, throat and stomach. Side effects caused by chemotherapy are neutropenia, abnormally low levels of infection fighting white blood cells; infections; anemia, a low red blood cell which can cause fatigue; mucositis, severe mouth, gum and throat sores or ulcers; nausea and vomiting; thrombocytopenia, an abnormally low number of platelets, which can cause bruising bleeding and emotional side effects such as depression and anxiety.

Infection can lead to additional medications, delays in chemotherapy treatment, hospitalizations and missed work or family time. Infections can be life threatening. Antibiotics can treat infection. Symptoms of infection are fever >100.5 and chills, sore throat, cough, shortness of breath, urinary changes such as pain or burning during

urination, drainage or oozing from wounds, discolored vaginal discharge, etc, dental pain, mouth pain, and impaired chewing, red or tender wound sites and diarrhea. Steps to avoid infection are to wash hands often and clean cuts with warm water, soap and antiseptic; avoid crowds and sick children; wash, peel, and cook all foods thoroughly and avoid tears and cuts to skin.

Anemia or a lower than normal red blood cell count, is another side effects of chemotherapy. Causes of anemia can be the cancer, cancer treatment including chemotherapy and radiation, poor nutrition, loss of red blood cells or bleeding and chronic kidney disease. Symptoms of anemia are fatigue, shortness of breath, especially with activity, confusion or loss of concentration, pale skin, rapid heartbeat, feeling cold, sadness or depression, reduced sexual desire and inability to do routine daily activities. Red blood cells contain hemoglobin, which carries oxygen throughout the body. Chemotherapy can kill red blood cells and decrease your body's ability to make new red blood cells. Without enough red blood cells, the heart is forced to work harder to deliver oxygen. Anemia can cause patients to feel tired or fatigued. Coping with anemia includes asking family members and friends to help with important chores, exercise in moderation, as this may increase energy level, plan low energy activities such as reading and watching TV, take naps, talk with the doctor and nurse about energy. Blood tests can help decide if fatigue is caused by anemia and whether it can be treated. The health care team can help the patient decide on treatment options.

Nausea and vomiting can be troublesome to patients who are taking chemotherapy. Measures to manage nausea are to avoid eating several hours before chemotherapy, eat several small meals during the day, eat foods mild in temperature

and spiciness, avoid strong food odors, drink cool, clear fluids, stay hydrated, and practice relaxation techniques.

Mucositis or mouth sores can be another side effect of chemotherapy. Brushing after every meal with a soft toothbrush, eating foods cold or at room temperature, avoiding spicy, acidic or sharp, crunchy foods, eating soft foods, using lip balm, keeping the mouth moist, sugarless gum and talking with the doctor when sores appear are ways to manage mouth sores.

Pain can be caused by cancer pressing against bones, nerve tissue or body organs. It can be caused by surgery, radiation or chemotherapy or mucositis or mouth sores. Common pain relievers such as acetaminophen can manage mild pain. Pain that is more severe may require a stronger prescription that can be taken by mouth, by injection or through a time-release skin patch. It is important to tell the doctor about pain so he or she can decide the best way to treat it. Pain can often be managed by non-drug methods.

Chemotherapy effects on the skin include itchiness, redness, drying, peeling, acne, sensitivity to sun and brittle nails. Patients find that quick showers rather than long baths are helpful. Skin creams or lotions, avoiding perfumes, colognes and aftershaves, using sunscreen, long sleeves and wide brimmed hats and gloves when washing dishes are helpful in managing skin problems.

Chemotherapy can cause thinning or complete loss of hair on all parts of the body, depending on the treatment prescribed and chemotherapy drugs given. It can also cause color or texture changes, dulling or drying of the hair. In preparing for hair loss, patients are encouraged to buy wigs, hats and scarves ahead of time, use mild

shampoos and shampoo less often, use low heat when drying hair, cut hair short before chemotherapy to make hair loss less apparent and less emotionally troubling and avoid hair dyes and perms. Hair loss can be difficult emotionally. The American Cancer Society “Look Good... Feel Better” program can help. Family and social support can be helpful as well.

Steps that patients can take to improve the chemotherapy experience are:

- Understand and follow the plan of therapy
- Report any side effects such as infection, fatigue, and mouth discomfort
- Take medications as prescribed to decrease and manage side effects
- Address emotional effects of treatment
- Prepare and get questions answered

Questions to ask the doctor or nurse

What type of cancer do I have?

What type of treatment are you recommending and why?

What is the goal of my chemotherapy-to cure the cancer or control the symptoms?

How successful is this treatment for most people?

What are the long and short-term risks of treatment?

How will chemotherapy be administered? How often? Who will give it to me? Where will I go to receive it?

How important is it to get chemotherapy on schedule? What can be done to help make sure this happens?

Will I experience side effects? When and how long will they last?

What side effects can be treated or minimized?

Are there symptoms that I should call a doctor or nurse about right away? Whom should I call?

Can any side effect cause me to be hospitalized? Why?

Are there resources available if I feel emotionally troubled?

Can I keep working?

Whom should I call if I have questions?

The emotional effects of chemotherapy are important but often not recognized. These effects may make it hard to carry out daily activities in addition to dealing with the physical effects of chemotherapy. Common emotions with chemotherapy are depression, anxiety, stress, mood swings, irritability, insomnia, fear and denial. More than half of patients undergoing chemotherapy report anxiety and depression about potential side effects, treatments and unknown consequences of therapy.

Patients also worry about how chemotherapy can affect their physical appearance. Patients have told healthcare professionals that understanding their treatment helps them feel more in control. Methods that help with regaining a sense of control are to talk with someone else who has had cancer, pray or seek spiritual guidance, use the internet wisely and using resources such as health care staff, clergy, local or national organizations or the public library. Other methods for coping include art therapy, keeping a journal, music therapy, visualization, meditation and relaxation and exercise, eating a balanced diet, rest, laughter, and rewarding yourself for reaching goals. Patients have said it is also helpful to involve family and friends with medical

discussions and help with tasks such as making dinner, picking up children from school and running errands

Preparing employers for treatment is important. Discuss employment concerns with the health care team. It is helpful to check the employer policy manual regarding sick leave, disability medical and life insurance. Many cancer centers have social workers that can help with financial issues as well as support for patients and families.

Improved chemotherapy, medications to help or avoid side effects, improved survival rates and better control of pain are all advances in cancer care. These advances have all improved the quality of life of people diagnosed with cancer.

Resources for patients and families diagnosed with cancer

American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society advocates for policies and laws and raises funds for cancer research. This organization offers programs such as Look Good...Feel Better, Cancer Survivors Network and I Can Cope. The Web site offers comprehensive cancer information

1.800.ACS.2345; www.cancer.org

CancerCare, Inc.

Cancer Care services include counseling, education, referral, financial assistance and other support services. The website offers specific information about breast cancer.

1.800.813.4673; www.cancercare.org

National Cancer Institute

This government organization provides information about breast cancer, early detections and treatment. The web site provides access to information about cancer, clinical trials and health services. NCI offers booklets on a variety of cancer-related topics.

1.800.422.6237; www.nci.nhi.gov or www.cancernet.nci.nih.gov

Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation

This organization's mission is to conquer breast cancer through research, education, screening and treatment. The Web site provides information on breast cancer, including risk factors, treatment, prevention as well as a listing of resources in local communities.

1.800.462.9273; www.komen.org

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship

This organization, founded by cancer survivors, advocates for research and public policies. Visit the web site to learn about programs, conferences, and events that NCCS sponsors. www.cansearch.org

Patient Advocate Foundation

The Web site provides insurance and financial information, legislative updates and legal guidance to patients and their families. www.patientadvocate.org