

## Everything I Wish I Would Have Known.... **About Chemotherapy**

If you will be receiving chemotherapy as part of your cancer treatment, here are some helpful tips .

1. Side effects vary from person to person and are influenced by which chemotherapy drugs are used. It is important to remember that your experience with chemotherapy may be different than another person's. Some people have many side effects; some have few. Some of the common side effects include fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, hair loss, skin reactions, diarrhea, constipation. Always tell your care team about the side effects you're experiencing so they can help prevent and manage symptom impact. Typically, steroids are given before, during and after infusions. Many women have a noticeable response ranging from uplifted mood, an energy boost, increased appetite to overstimulation and insomnia. If you feel too uncomfortable after taking steroids, ask if the dose can be reduced. While steroids are given to prevent allergic reaction and some side effects, they can be disruptive to sleep especially if given on a weekly basis. After infusions, most women report feeling fairly fine on infusion day with a gradual decline over the first 2 days after chemo and feeling better by day 5-6.

2. Fatigue is very common. Rest when you can and adjust your daily routine as needed. Rest and sleep are essential to healing. If you have children at home, let them know that resting and sleeping are part of your treatment. Ask them to help you get the rest you need. Tell your medical team if you are having trouble sleeping.

3. Hydration is a high priority. Drinking water throughout the day will help you feel better, stay energized, help with dry mouth and help your skin stay moisturized. Try adding flavoring or fruit to the water if that will help you drink more. Try to drink at least two quarts of water per day, or more. Keep your water bottle filled and nearby and take water with you if you leave the house.

4. Nausea and appetite loss are common. Eat when you can and consider eating smaller, frequent meals. Identify foods that taste good to you and try to have them stocked at home. Some women find that certain smells and tastes bother them, and others report experiencing a metallic taste that comes and goes. Your sense of smell and taste may be decreased. Ginger tea/candies can help with nausea. Try to stay ahead of nausea by taking your prescribed medication at the first sign of stomach upset. Nausea medications often cause constipation, so have a stool softener, like Colace, and a gentle laxative such as Miralax or Senokot on hand. Some women choose to stop eating at 4:00 pm the day prior to an infusion and not eat until after receiving chemo. Although drinking water and tea is encouraged. Research suggests that this type of intermittent fasting may help chemotherapy drugs target cancer cells more efficiently. Talk with your doctor about this prior to trying it.

5. Skin sensitivity is common, especially on hands and feet. Tell your team right away if you experience pain, numbness or a tingling sensation in your hands and feet (neuropathy). Some women use specialized cold socks and mitts during infusions to help prevent neuropathy. It is especially important to use sun screen when going outside, and to apply moisturizers frequently. Many women use gentle, fragrance-free soaps and lotions. Lotions and products from Cetaphil, Aquaphor, CeraVe and LaRoche-Posay are often recommended by medical teams. Mouth sores can develop during chemo, and your doctor/NP can prescribe "chemo mouthwash" to help heal your mouth and reduce pain. Using gentle toothpaste such as Biotene can be less irritating. Chemotherapy may cause a running nose and coughing. Mention this to your doctor to see if it is something you should address. Some chemotherapy medications can cause rashes and redness. This is a side effect you should report to your medical team right away.

6. Hair Loss is a side effect of many chemotherapy agents. Some women try cold capping, which involves using a scalp cooling device to help reduce hair loss during infusions. Cold capping requires advanced planning and set-up, so if you want to use it, talk with the team prior to your first infusion. If hair loss occurs, hats, scarves and wigs are an option. Check with the American Cancer Society for information on where to find free wigs and other head coverings. Some women like to explore these options before starting chemo so they feel more confident and prepared. Many women shave their heads before or as they are losing their hair. The scalp may become quite sensitive with hair loss. A satin pillow case or tight fitting cap may help reduce friction of your head against the pillow while sleeping. Also, check out <https://everyou.com> if you need headwear, or specialized garments.

7. Pack a “chemo bag” with your water bottle, preferred snacks/lunch, a favorite blanket, entertainment (book, magazine, music, cards, crafts, etc.), lotion, comfy clothes, slippers. Bring a friend or family member with you, if you like company. They can provide emotional support. Try to make your infusion sessions as comfortable as possible.

8. Communication with your healthcare team is essential. Remember that they are there to help you. It’s important to ask questions. Tell them about your side effects, even if they seem minor. Don’t hesitate to voice any concerns. They can offer guidance, prescribe medications, or suggest strategies to manage side effects. Be your own advocate or bring someone with you that can speak up for you. Remember they can’t help you if they don’t know what you are experiencing.

9. Family and friends may feel sad, fearful and powerless. Spouses and children are particularly vulnerable. If you are a mother, you most likely feel an added layer of concern thinking about your kids. Even teens/adult children can feel worried and upset as they watch their mother going through treatment. Communicate with your family as much as possible, and reassure them that you are doing everything you can to fight the cancer. Ask your spouse to take over all/some of the responsibilities that you shoulder for the family. Ask them to help you in concrete ways such as watching a funny movie with you, giving you a neck massage or filling your water bottle. Keep in mind the developmental age of your children and offer information on their level. Try to stick to the typical family routine, as much as possible, and focus on the present. Watch, or ask another adult to watch, your children for signs of depression. Communicate with your child’s school so that the teachers/counselor can watch for academic and/or behavioral changes. If needed, seek support from a pediatrician and/or mental health professional. Preventative online support for kids whose parents have a cancer diagnosis is available at [www.picklesgroup.org](http://www.picklesgroup.org).

10. Stay positive and don’t give up even if you’re feeling discouraged. Sometimes your fears are worse than the reality, and each day of treatment can surprise you and bring you closer to wellness. Seek out joy in your day to keep your spirits lifted. Remember that most people successfully complete chemotherapy. Research suggests that joining a support group like Women LISTEN, Inc. improves positive outcomes for patients. Many women find that listening to and talking with other women cancer survivors offers hope, useful information and emotional support.

Additional information is available in our **Everything I Wish I Would Have Known...** series on the website.