

Chemotherapy is one of many ways to treat cancer. Often called **chemo**, it uses one or more drugs to kill cancer cells. Sometimes chemo is used alone, and sometimes it is used along with other treatments such as surgery or radiation therapy.

## How does chemotherapy work?

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Our body is made up of many types of cells. Each cell works in a special way to keep us healthy. Cancer forms when a group of cells that are not normal grow and spread out of control. These abnormal cells can affect the way your body normally works.

Because your body can't stop or control the growth of the cancer cells by itself, your doctor may suggest that you have chemo to kill the cancer cells.

Chemo drugs travel through your bloodstream and are carried to the cancer cells. The chemo drugs can:

- stop cancer cells from growing and spreading
- control or slow the growth and spread of cancer cells
- shrink the size of the cancer.

There are about 50 kinds of drugs used in chemotherapy. Your doctor will decide which chemo drugs will work best for you.

## Why is chemotherapy best for me?

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Chemo is the best treatment for some kinds of cancers. It may:

- Cure your cancer.
- Control your cancer for awhile.

- Reduce the risk of cancer coming back.
- Help you get rid of or cope with cancer symptoms, such as pain.

Your health care team will explain why chemo is the best treatment for you.

## How will I get chemotherapy?

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There are several ways that chemo is given:

- by mouth in a pill, capsule, or liquid form
- by needle (liquid drugs will go right into your skin or muscle)
- by needle into a vein (liquid drugs will drip into a vein). This is called an intravenous (IV) infusion.

Chemotherapy is given in cycles. A cycle means you will have chemo for a period of time, such as

a few weeks, and then take a break from chemo. Then you will begin again, followed by a break, and so on. Most cycles are 3 or 4 weeks long. Your health care team will tell you how many cycles you need.

As the chemo drugs leave your body, you will need to follow your doctor or nurse's advice for a short period of time. Your doctor or nurse will give you more details about this, depending on your treatment.

## Where do I get treatment?

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Some people get chemo in the hospital. Others have it at a cancer clinic, in their doctor's office, or at home. Your doctor or nurse will discuss the choices with you.

## How long will my chemotherapy last?

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How long you have chemo depends on:

- the type of cancer you have
- what chemo drugs you will be taking
- how your cancer responds to the drugs
- how well you feel when you are getting chemo.

Most people have chemo for a set period of time, such as 4 to 6 months. Your doctor will discuss this with you. You will get your treatments once a day, once a week, or, once a month. Your doctor and nurse will see you during your treatments to make sure you are able and willing to continue.

## What are the side effects of chemotherapy?

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The chemo drugs are supposed to kill the cancer cells, but they can also damage your healthy cells (such as hair and blood cells). This can cause side effects. Some people do not have any side effects. Other people have a few or many side effects. No one knows exactly which side effects you will have until you begin your chemo.

Your side effects depend on the type of chemo drugs you get and how your cancer affects your body.

The most common side effects are:

- feeling very tired (fatigue)
- losing hair
- low blood cell levels, such as anemia or neutropenia (low white cell count)
- feeling like you might throw up (nausea)
- throwing up (vomiting)
- a sore mouth or sore throat
- not feeling hungry OR feeling very hungry

- changes in how you feel about sex
- for women, changes in their period (menstrual cycle)
- not being able to have a bowel movement (constipation)
- having diarrhea
- feeling numb or tingling in your hands or feet
- pain

Most of your healthy cells will go back to normal after chemo. In fact, for most people, the side effects of chemo go away soon after the treatment ends.

While you are having chemo, your doctor will likely prescribe medicine to reduce your side effects.

Your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse will give you more details about the side effects that you might have, and how to cope with them.

**Please keep in mind that side effects are NOT a sign of how well the drugs are working against your cancer.**



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## What is the difference between chemotherapy and other cancer treatments?

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The main difference is that chemotherapy treats the whole body rather than just one part of it. Chemo is also used to destroy cancer cells that have spread through your body.

## How can I cope with my cancer and chemotherapy?

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It is normal for you and your family to have many feelings at this time. Talk with your doctor, nurse, or someone else on your health care team about your feelings.

Your doctor and nurse are there to answer your questions and to help you.

## Questions to ask your health care team

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- Why is chemotherapy the best treatment for me?
- What are the benefits and risks of chemo for me?
- How and where will I get chemo?
- Can I have someone with me during my treatments?
- How will we know if the chemo worked?
- Will I be able to go to work when I'm having chemo?
- Can I keep doing things that I used to do?  
What should I not do?
- Will chemo affect whether or not I can have children?
- Can I travel or take a vacation when I'm having chemo?
- How often will I see my cancer doctor during my chemo?
- What happens when chemo ends?



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This fact sheet is meant to support the information that your health care team gives you. It is also meant to encourage you to ask questions to your health care team. This fact sheet does **not** replace any information that your healthcare team gives you.

Living Well With Cancer is a partnership among several people living with cancer, health care professionals, people who represent cancer and professional organizations, and Ortho Biotech. The LWWC partnership gratefully acknowledges the input of the QEII Health Sciences Centre in this fact sheet.

Living Well With Cancer Information Centre

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