

The side effects of chemotherapy

Bruising and bleeding

Treatment can sometimes affect the number of platelets, which help your blood to clot, which can lead to you bruising more easily or some unexpected bleeding.

You may find that your gums bleed or you have nose bleeds when you didn't before. If you notice things like this then you should tell your specialist nurse. This can sometimes be treated with extra platelets via a drip.

Anaemia

Chemotherapy can sometime reduce the number of red blood cells you have, and this can in turn lead to you becoming anaemic. Common symptoms of anaemia include extreme tiredness and dizziness.

Your red blood cells will be monitored by the blood tests you have throughout treatment, and if they are found to be particularly low you might have to have a blood transfusion to increase the levels.

Feeling sick

This is a common side effect of chemotherapy, and one that will usually occur in the first few days after your treatment.

Be sure to let your specialist nurse know if you feel sick as this can be easily treated with anti-emetics (anti-sickness drugs). There are lots of different types of these drugs so let your nurse know if what you are prescribed is not effective as they will be able to find a more suitable alternative.

Tiredness

It is normal to feel tired as your treatment goes on, and especially as your cycle comes to an end.

Be sure not to over exert yourself and get plenty of rest, although it can be helpful to do some very gentle activity. Things such as taking a short walk, even if it is just round the garden or to the end of the road will help keep you active and balance out the time you spend resting.

Be sensible with things such as driving, and avoiding doing so if you feel extremely tired or drowsy.

Hair loss

Hair loss is a common, but not inevitable, side effect of chemotherapy.

You might lose hair from your head, eyebrows and lashes and body. It is temporary and your hair will grow back.

A cold cap can be worn during treatment to help reduce the chances of this happening, have a chat with your CNS nurse to see if this is something you want to consider using

Diarrhoea and constipation

You might find that your bowel habits change a lot during your treatment.

Let your CNS know if you are suffering from diarrhoea as there are effective medications that can help stop this.

If you are constipated try to increase the amount of fluid you drink. You should attempt to drink at least 2 litres of fluid a day. A higher fibre diet could be help so try, if possible, to eat more fruit and vegetables and whole grain foods

There are also some medications that can help with constipation. Talk to your CNS about these.

Sore mouth

You experience a very sore mouth during chemotherapy and get a number of ulcers which can be painful.

Make sure to clean your teeth carefully and gently, a children's toothbrush which has softer bristles can be helpful.

Try to avoid foods that are going to irritate your mouth such as fizzy, sharp, sour and spicy.

Speak to your CNS about medication to help reduce the pain, and what mouth washes might be helpful.

Fertility and early menopause

Depending on your treatment, there is some risk that chemotherapy may affect fertility and bring on early menopause even if your surgery is 'fertility sparing'.