

Chemotherapy - Frequently Asked Questions

Below is a list of questions and the answers that people commonly ask about their Chemotherapy. We encourage patients and their families to ask as many questions as the need to get a good understanding of what to expect.

Some patients say it can be helpful to keep a diary, note book or document on your phone or tablet with questions you think of at home or when speaking to friends and family. We are happy to help work through these questions when you are next in the clinic.

Can I hold my children, grandchildren and pets?

Yes, it is safe to continue your contact with your family and pets as you normally would. Some chemotherapy can lower your immune system, this will make you more susceptible to picking up things like viruses and infections, which can make you very sick when your immune system is not working properly. It's always good to practice regular hand washing and reduce contact with people who are unwell due to infections or viruses until they are better. It's always good to talk to the nurses and doctors providing your treatment about how to reduce infection risks.

Will my hair fall out?

Not everyone who has cancer treatment loses their hair.

Hair loss, thinning and changes to the look and feel of your hair does happen with some specific chemotherapy drugs. When you initially discuss your treatment with your doctor and the rest of the team, we will talk to you about your specific treatment. If it does occur it's important to know that hair loss is temporary and there are a range of resources and supports available to you and your family to guide you through the experience.

Can I dye my hair?

Yes, patients having cancer treatment can dye their hair; some people prefer a plant-based dye because it may be softer on their skin.

Can I still work?

It is okay for people to continue working whilst receiving chemotherapy. It is helpful to be aware that tiredness and fatigue are common side-effects of cancer treatment. Many patients report that reduced hours/flexible work arrangements during treatment are helpful. Speaking with your oncologist about your specific treatment and work is important. They will also be able to provide you with a medical certificate for your treatment.

We also have Social Workers and Centrelink Services available to assist with financial considerations during and after your treatment.

How often will I have to come for my treatment?

Chemotherapy and other drug treatment times vary depending on the drugs being given and whether they are being given in addition to another form of cancer treatment. Treatment may incorporate one day or consecutive days per month, week, fortnight or every three weeks, with each “cycle” repeating for a set number of courses.

All patients coming for cancer treatment will be provided with a schedule of their visit times.

How long does each treatment take?

Depending on the drug/s being given, your visit to the clinic may vary from a few minutes to several hours. We will always give you the best estimate of the time-frame for your chemotherapy or treatment when you are booked in.

Can people come to treatment with me?

Yes, you are welcome to bring 1-2 people to treatment with you. Due to space and safety in the clinic, we try to keep this at no more than 2 visitors. The chemotherapy unit is not well set up for children, if you need to have children with you or visiting, please discuss this with the nursing staff in the clinic before your treatment.

Do I take my usual medications?

Occasionally you might be asked not to take a specific drug on the day of treatment due to possible interactions with your planned treatment. Your Oncologist will need to know what medications you are taking, including any over the counter supplements or herbal remedies. If you stop, start or change dose of any medication, supplement or herbal remedies please let staff know prior to treatment.

Can I eat before treatment?

It's okay to eat and drink as you normally would on the day of treatment. Some people find it helpful to avoid hot/spicy foods and alcohol around their treatment days to reduce the risk of heartburn/gut irritation.

If you are going to consume alcohol while you are receiving cancer treatment it is important to discuss this with your Oncologist.

How is chemotherapy treatment given?

Although some chemotherapy is available in tablet form, most chemotherapy is via a peripheral cannula (needle in the vein). Some people will need to have an additional device inserted into their vein, which may stay in place for many weeks or years, depending on their treatment. These are known as vascular access devices. Your Oncologist and treating team will discuss what is right for you when planning your treatment.

Will I be sick after treatment?

Not all chemotherapy drugs cause nausea, however, aiming for prevention is helpful by taking your anti-nausea medication as prescribed and keeping up your fluids before and after treatment. There are also a range of additional anti-sickness medications which can be used prior, during and after your treatment to reduce nausea and vomiting.

Can I drive after treatment?

We recommend for your first treatment to have a designated driver and see how you go before you plan to drive yourself for future treatments. Sometimes extra drugs are given as part of your treatment before the chemotherapy; this is to reduce the chances of reactions to the drug/s. Some of these “pre-medication” drugs may cause drowsiness and slow your response times.

Can I have sex?

Yes, sex and intimacy are a very important part of many people’s relationships, this does not need to be stopped because a person has cancer. Some treatments can require additional precautions such as forms of birth control or protection. It’s good to speak with your oncologist when planning your treatment about sex and intimacy.

Some people may experience changes in their ‘sex drive’ related to various cancer treatments, this is common and is temporary for most people. There are a range of supports and resources available, a good place to start is speaking with your oncologist or your specialist cancer nurse.

Can I go swimming?

Yes, you can generally go swimming while having cancer treatment. It’s important to keep some dressings or devices dry. Before going swimming talk to your treating cancer nurse about what will work best for you.

How will I know if my treatment is working?

You will have regular blood tests and scans, as well as assessments by your oncologist during and after your treatment. If you are experiencing any new symptoms or you feel unsure if your treatment is working, it's important to talk about this with your oncologist.

If symptoms come on very suddenly or you become very unwell during or shortly after cancer treatment, it is important to go to your closest emergency department for assessment. It may be that you have an infection, virus or side effect to your treatment. Becoming unwell during or shortly after treatment does not necessarily mean your treatment is not working.

Northern Cancer Service

Contact us

Call 1300 667 674

Launceston

W.P. Holman Clinic
Launceston General Hospital
274-280 Charles Street
Launceston 7250

Burnie

North West Cancer Centre
North West Regional Hospital
23 Brickport Road
Burnie 7320

Latrobe

Mersey Oncology-Medical Day Procedure Unit
Mersey Community Hospital
Torquay Road
Latrobe 7307

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