

CHEMOTHERAPY

for Breast Cancer

When is chemotherapy for early breast cancer given?

If you need chemotherapy, talk with your doctor about the timing. Sometimes, chemotherapy is given:

Before surgery (called neoadjuvant or preoperative chemotherapy)

- This may shrink the tumor enough to make a lumpectomy an option to mastectomy.

After surgery (called adjuvant chemotherapy)

- This helps lower the risk of breast cancer recurrence by getting rid of cancer cells that might still be in the body. These cells are too small to see on scans or to measure with lab tests. Chemotherapy usually starts within 4 to 8 weeks after surgery. It's given before radiation therapy (if radiation therapy is needed).

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy drugs kill or disable cancer cells in the breast and other places in the body. It helps lower the risk of the cancer coming back (recurrence).

Although chemotherapy is a treatment option for most types of breast cancer, it's not always needed. The decision to use it is based on:

- Tumor stage and tumor characteristics (biomarkers such as hormone receptor status and HER2 status)
- Age
- Overall health
- Personal preference

For people with metastatic breast cancer, chemotherapy is used to kill cancer cells that have spread from the breast to other parts of the body. Chemotherapy can reduce cancer-related symptoms and increase survival.

Learn more about [chemotherapy for metastatic breast cancer](#).

How is chemotherapy given?

Chemotherapy is usually given by vein (through an IV). To avoid having an IV put in at each visit, you may have a surgical procedure to insert a port-a-cath into the skin of your chest. A few chemotherapy drugs are pills.

Chemotherapy is often given in cycles, with days or weeks in between treatments. This gives your body a chance to rest between treatments. A full course usually lasts 3 to 6 months.

Although chemotherapy drugs are effective on their own, they are often given in combinations.



What are some side effects of chemotherapy?

The side effects you're likely to have depend on the chemotherapy drugs you're given. Most side effects begin to go away shortly after treatment ends. Some side effects include:

Hair loss (alopecia)

With some chemotherapy drugs, you almost always lose your hair. Hair loss may occur all over your body.

Using a gentle shampoo and washing your hair less often may help reduce hair loss. Depending on the type of chemotherapy, scalp cooling may also help. You wear a special cap filled with a very cold substance before, during and after each chemotherapy session. Scalp cooling may not be covered by your insurance, so be sure to check.

Hair will begin to grow back 1 to 2 months after chemotherapy ends.

This fact sheet is intended to be a brief overview. For more information, visit komen.org or call the Komen Patient Care Center's Breast Care Helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. ET and Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET or email at helpline@komen.org. Se habla español.

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN
(1-877-465-6636)
komen.org

Related online resources:

- [Clinical Trials](#)
- [Side Effects After Breast Cancer Treatment Ends](#)
- [Treatment Overview for Breast Cancer](#)
- [Complementary and Integrative Therapies](#)
- [Questions to Ask Your Doctor - Chemotherapy and Side Effects](#)

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Help discover cures for breast cancer, faster. Your breast cancer information is as unique as you are. When combined with thousands of other ShareForCures members, you provide scientists with a more diverse set of data to make new discoveries faster. Learn more at komen.org/shareforcures/.

Fatigue

Try to get plenty of rest and ask family and friends for help when you need it. Exercise, yoga, meditation and acupuncture may help relieve [fatigue](#).

Nail changes

Your fingernails and toenails can become weak or get darker. Your nails may become sore and may fall off. Keep your nails short during treatment.

Nausea and vomiting

Your doctor can prescribe anti-nausea medications.

Eat bland, easy-to-digest foods that don't have an odor. Eating small meals throughout the day may help.

Diarrhea

Bowel movements may become more frequent and looser. You may have cramping and gas. Your doctor can suggest over-the-counter drugs, or you may need a prescription medicine.

Eat small, bland meals (such as bananas, rice, toast, applesauce or plain pasta). Drink 8 to 10 large glasses of clear liquids every day. Broth and sports drinks with electrolytes are good choices.

Pain

Some chemotherapy drugs may cause nerve damage. You may feel a burning or shooting pain, or numbness (called [neuropathy](#)), usually in your fingers or toes. Chemotherapy may also cause muscle pain.

If you have any pain or numbness, tell your doctor. They may adjust your treatment plan, prescribe mild pain relievers or suggest other ways to ease your symptoms.

Mouth and throat sores

Sores in the mouth or throat can make it painful to eat or drink. Your doctor can prescribe a special mouthwash or other medication to relieve pain and treat the sores. Rinsing your mouth with baking soda and water may help. Avoid mouthwashes that contain alcohol. Mouth sores go away once chemotherapy ends.

Cognitive function (cancer brain, chemo-brain)

Some people have [cognitive problems](#) after chemotherapy or other breast cancer treatments. Problems include mental “fogginess” and trouble with concentration, memory and multi-tasking. Most people have mild symptoms. Some may have cognitive problems that can impact daily life. Most people say these symptoms go away over time. The long-term impact of chemotherapy on cognitive function is under study.

Other side effects

- [Constipation](#)
- [Temporary loss of menstrual periods](#)
- [Menopausal symptoms](#)
- [Risk of infection](#)
- [Weight gain](#)

It's normal to worry about possible side effects of chemotherapy, but breast cancer treatment is most effective when all parts of the treatment plan are followed as prescribed. Don't feel you have to endure side effects, such as nausea. Talk with your doctor about any side effects you have.

Your doctor may be able to prescribe medications to treat your side effects or change your treatment plan to reduce them.

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