

CHEMOTHERAPY

For Early Breast Cancer

When is chemotherapy given?

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

Before surgery (called neoadjuvant or preoperative chemotherapy)

- In women with large tumors who need a mastectomy, neoadjuvant chemotherapy may shrink the tumor enough so a lumpectomy becomes an option.

After surgery (called adjuvant chemotherapy)

- Adjuvant chemotherapy 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 (when radiation therapy is needed).

Dental check-up

Get a dental check-up before starting chemotherapy. During treatment, brush your teeth and gums after each meal and at bedtime using a soft toothbrush.

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 returning.

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 (such as hormone receptor status and HER2 status),
- age,
- overall health and
- personal preferences.

How is chemotherapy 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 skin of the chest.
- Some are pills.

Chemotherapy is often given in cycles, with days or weeks off 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 more 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 are given. Most side effects begin to go away shortly after treatment ends. Some short-term side effects are:

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. 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.

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

For more information, visit komen.org or call Susan G. Komen's Breast Care Helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 10 PM ET.

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Resources

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

**National Comprehensive
Cancer Network**
nccn.org

Related educational resources:

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

Fatigue

Try to get plenty of rest and ask family and friends for help. Exercise, meditation, acupuncture and yoga may help relieve fatigue.

Nail changes

Your fingernails and toenails can become weak or get darker. The 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 also help.

Diarrhea

Bowel movements may become more frequent and looser. You may also 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, usually in your fingers or toes. Chemotherapy may also cause muscle pain or numbness.

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 women 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](#)
- [Sleep disorders \(insomnia\)](#)

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