

# CHEMOTHERAPY FOR EARLY BREAST CANCER

## When is chemotherapy given?

If you need chemotherapy, talk with your doctor about whether it's best to have it either:

### Before surgery (called neoadjuvant or preoperative chemotherapy)

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

### After surgery (called adjuvant chemotherapy)

- But before radiation therapy, adjuvant chemotherapy usually starts within 4 to 8 weeks after surgery.

## 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 or 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 these factors:

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

## How is chemotherapy given?

- By vein (through an IV).
- By a port-a-cath (inserted into skin of the chest via a surgical procedure).
- A few chemotherapy drugs are pills.

Chemotherapy is often given in cycles, with days or weeks off between treatments. These cycles give 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 may be given in combinations to make them even better at killing cancer cells.



## 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. Though it's most visible on your head, hair loss may occur all over your body. Using a gentle shampoo and washing your hair less often may help reduce hair loss.

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

### Fatigue

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

For more information, visit [komen.org](http://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.

## Resources

**Susan G. Komen®**  
1-877 GO KOMEN  
(1-877-465-6636)  
[komen.org](http://komen.org)

**American Cancer Society**  
1-800-ACS-2345  
[cancer.org](http://cancer.org)

**National Cancer Institute**  
1-800-4-CANCER  
[cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov)

## Related educational resources:

- [Clinical Trials](#)
- [Life After Breast Cancer Treatment](#)
- [Making Breast Cancer Treatment Decisions](#)
- [Questions to Ask Your Doctor - Chemotherapy and Side Effects](#)

### Nail weakness

Your fingernails and toenails can become weak. The nails may become sore and may fall off. Keep your nails short during treatment. This may make nail care easier. Your nails will return to normal once chemotherapy ends.

### Nausea and vomiting

Your doctor can prescribe anti-nausea medications.

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

### Diarrhea

Bowel movements may become more frequent and/or 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 8-10 large glasses of clear liquids.

Broth and sports drinks with electrolytes are good choices.

### Pain

Chemotherapy can cause nerve damage. You may feel a burning or shooting pain, or numbness, usually in your fingers or toes. Chemotherapy can also cause muscle pain or numbness.

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

These side effects almost always go away after chemotherapy ends.

### 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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