

# Treating Breast Cancer with Chemotherapy

Every woman's breast cancer is unique and will require treatment specifically for her. Some will require surgery, chemotherapy or hormone therapy and radiotherapy. Some will need only surgery and radiotherapy. Every woman is an individual case.

## What is Chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells. Chemotherapy drugs are given by injection into the vein (intravenously) or as tablets (orally). When chemotherapy treatment is given intravenously it is in sessions and this is followed by a rest period of a few weeks to allow your body to rest. A complete course of chemotherapy is likely to take 4–6 months.

## What are the Benefits of Chemotherapy?

In women where the chance of the cancer coming back is higher, chemotherapy may greatly reduce the chance of recurrence.

## Why are there Side Effects?

Chemotherapy kills cancer cells but is also harmful to normal cells. However, the healthy cells recover quickly.

## What are the side effects?

Side effects depend upon the combination of chemotherapy drugs given. Not all women will have the same side effects. For example, some women lose their hair and some women don't. Side effects you will have depend on the type of chemotherapy.

## The most common side effects are:

- **Lowered resistance to infection**  
Chemotherapy can reduce the production of **white blood cells** (the immune system cells) and make you more prone to infection. Contact your doctor if your temperature goes above 38°C (100.5°F) or if you suddenly feel ill. Before treatment you will have to have a blood test to see if your blood cells have recovered. If the blood test shows that your white blood cells are low you will need to delay treatment.
- **Bruising or bleeding**  
Inform your doctor if you notice this.
- **Anemia (low number of red blood cells)**  
You may feel tired and breathless. You can increase your red blood cells through diet. See BCFE nutrition booklet.
- **Nausea and vomiting**  
Please take your anti-sickness drugs as prescribed by the doctor. If they are not effective, contact him. See BCFE nutrition booklet.
- **Constipation**

Increase fluids and take a high fibre diet. See BCFE nutrition booklet. But contact your doctor if this persists.

- **Sore mouth**  
See BCFE nutrition booklet.
- **Poor appetite**  
See BCFE nutrition booklet
- **Hair loss**
- **Early menopause**
- **Fertility**  
The closer you are to your natural menopause, the more likely chemotherapy will induce a permanent menopause.

Chemotherapy affects people in different ways. Some people find they are able to lead a fairly normal life during their treatment, but many people become very tired and have to take things much more slowly. Just do as much as you feel like and try not to overdo it.

### **Some people say that chemotherapy is harmful. Is this true?**

For someone suffering from cancer, chemotherapy is not harmful because chemotherapy drugs are needed to kill off cancer cells. Chemotherapy kills cancer cells but is also harmful to normal good cells. However, the healthy cells recover quickly.

For some people surgery is not enough on its own and chemotherapy must follow it. It is of the utmost importance that when you start the course you complete it. It is a difficult journey for any woman, but the benefits outweigh the risks. In women where the chance of cancer coming back is higher, chemotherapy may greatly reduce the risk of recurrence. Your doctor will let you know how likely the chemotherapy is to make a difference in your case.

### **I know people who received chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment. Why am I only getting chemotherapy?**

Some of the factors that influence treatment choices include tumor size, how early it is caught, position, grade (aggressiveness) whether the lymph nodes are involved and estrogen receptors. The treatment you are given is very personal. Not everyone will have the same treatment. Some women don't have any chemotherapy after surgery. Some have both chemotherapy and radiotherapy and some only one of them. Your doctor can provide you with more information specific to you.

### **My periods have stopped since taking chemotherapy. Will I get them again?**

Some chemotherapy drugs can have an affect on the ovaries and stop your periods. Whether your periods return or not will depend on your age. The younger you are the more likely the periods will return. If you are nearer to your natural menopause it is more likely to induce menopause. For some this will be permanent.

Symptoms of the menopause may be hot flashes, sweats, vaginal dryness, sleeplessness, dry skin. Some psychological effects of the menopause can be experienced. Psychological effects can include mood swings, loss of concentration and poor confidence.

For those women whose periods do return this usually happens within 3 to 6 months of stopping chemotherapy. If, 3 months or so after the end of treatment your periods have not come back and you are concerned about what is happening, your doctors can arrange blood tests which look at the levels of female hormones and these can often give a clearer picture of whether or not the periods will return.

### **Will chemotherapy affect my fertility?**

Chemotherapy can often cause infertility, although for many people this will be temporary. This will depend on the dose of the drugs, the type of drugs, whether there is a combination of drugs, and your age. The nearer you are in age to the menopause the more risk it will affect fertility.

If fertility is an important issue for you, then discuss this with your specialist. If there is a choice of chemotherapy treatments that are suitable for your particular circumstances, then you can opt for the one which carries the smallest risk of becoming infertile as a result of that treatment.

### **Can I get pregnant during chemotherapy?**

Although the chemotherapy can stop your periods, pregnancy is still possible. You cannot take the contraceptive pill if you have had breast cancer therefore you must use a barrier method of contraception like the condom. Consult your doctor when it is safe to get pregnant.

### **Sexual Relations**

It is quite normal not to feel like having sex during chemotherapy. It is important that you talk to your husband about how you feel. In general, most chemotherapy drugs are excreted from the body within the first 72 hours of having each session, so it is not advisable to have sexual relations during that period.

### **My white blood cell count is low after chemotherapy. Is there are special diet I should follow?**

This is one of the most common and worrying side effects. Most types of chemotherapy used to treat breast cancer will cause a fall in the white blood cell count about a week after the drugs are given but usually the white cells will have recovered before the next course is given. Allowing time for recovery of the blood count is one of the main reasons for having a gap of several weeks between the courses of treatment.

As far as diet is concerned there really is nothing you can eat or drink that will actually boost your white blood cell count, although keeping to a normal healthy diet is important. When your white count is very low, however, you might be advised to avoid certain foods and adjust your diet to reduce the risk of infection. Avoid salads, fruit which does not have to be peeled, live yoghurt and ice cream, uncooked eggs or any food which may have a high bacterial content. Reheated food should also be avoided and all cooked food should be thoroughly cooked. For the great majority of

women having chemotherapy for breast cancer these precautions are not necessary, even if the white count is reduced. Check with your doctors to see if they feel you need to change your diet in this way.

References [www.bacupuk.org](http://www.bacupuk.org)