A guide to attending for chemotherapy treatment

Patient information

Speciality Medicine – Radiotherapy and Oncology

together we do the amazing
This guide is for patients attending for chemotherapy treatment in the Chemotherapy Day Unit and Ward 19 at The James Cook University Hospital and the Mowbray Suite at the Friarage Hospital, Northallerton.

Please bring this booklet to all hospital appointments and any admissions, and show to your general practitioner, dentist, district nurse or Macmillan nurse when you see them.

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We hope you find this booklet helpful, please share it with your family and friends, it is very important that they feel well informed too.

If you would like to make any comments or suggestions so that our next edition can be improved further, please contact our liaison department on 01642 282484 or speak to a member of your health care team.

Introduction
There are many different types of cancer and many different chemotherapy treatments. The type of treatment you receive will be explained in more detail by your consultant, and further written information about the particular drugs will be given to you.

In some cases the chemotherapy can take a number of hours to give, in which case, some people like to have someone with them for company, however because of the limited amount of space available, we would be grateful if you could limit this to only one person. They will be able to stay with you while you have your blood checked and while you are receiving your chemotherapy. You may find it helpful prior to your appointment to make a note (at the back of this booklet), of the things you would like to ask.

It is very important that you let us know if you may be pregnant.

What to bring
Please bring a list of all your current medication and a pair of reading glasses if worn.

Confidentiality
We will not give out information about you or your illness to anyone except your GP without your permission. Under certain circumstances you have a right to see information about yourself which is held by us, under the terms of the Access to Health Records/Data Protection Act. For further details please contact the Health Records Manager (telephone 01642 854789).
Supervision of children
The trust cannot take any responsibility for the care of children when accompanying patients who are attending the department for a clinic appointment or treatment. The patient must therefore make alternative arrangements to ensure children are supervised at all times whilst in the department.

What is chemotherapy?
Chemotherapy means chemical treatment. It is anti-cancer (cytotoxic) drug treatment used to kill cancer cells. Chemotherapy may be given through the veins (intravenously) or orally (tablets). The chemotherapy that you receive may be one drug given alone, or may be several different drugs given together. Chemotherapy may be used with other forms of treatment such as radiotherapy.

How do the drugs work?
Cytotoxic drugs work by interfering with the way cells divide. Cancer cells are rapidly dividing and are therefore more susceptible to damage by these drugs than normal cells. However, some normal cells are affected, and this causes side effects. The normal cells are able to recover during the time between cycles of chemotherapy, but the abnormal cancer cells do not.

The chemotherapy drugs are given into, or are absorbed into, the bloodstream, and so go to all areas of the body where there may be cancer cells.

When is chemotherapy used?
Chemotherapy may be given at different times during the course of your treatment. In some cases it is given after surgical removal of the cancer, to try and prevent the cancer returning (adjuvant treatment). In a small number of cases it can be given before surgery to shrink the size of the cancer and so make the operation easier. In other cases it is given if the cancer returns or spreads to other organs.

How often is the chemotherapy given?
Different chemotherapy drugs and regimens are given at different times, but most are given on a three or four week cycle. However, some drugs are given every week, and tablet chemotherapy will be given over a number of days. Ask your doctor exactly when your treatment will be given.

Will chemotherapy affect my everyday life?
Chemotherapy affects everyone differently. Some people continue to lead a near normal life while on treatment, continuing to work and to have a normal home and social life. Some people find it more difficult, but even if the chemotherapy does make you feel unwell, most people will recover quickly between treatments and at that stage resume normal activities.

Many employers are supportive while employees are having chemotherapy, and some will let you work part-time, or have a few days off after each treatment. This will obviously depend on each individual employer and each employee but if you wish to continue working you should explore all the options further with your employer.
Consent to treatment
Your consultant will explain the aims of your treatment and any side effects before you agree to, or consent to treatment. You will also be given written information about the chemotherapy drugs themselves and the side effects that they may cause. Please discuss any questions or concerns that you have either with your doctor or with the clinic or chemotherapy nurses.

What happens when I come for my chemotherapy?
You may need to see a doctor/nurse before each course of chemotherapy. This may be on the same day as your chemotherapy or may be on a different day. The doctor/nurse will want to find out about the side effects that you have experienced and if possible make an assessment of whether the treatment is helping.

Chemotherapy can lower your blood cell levels so you will need to have your blood count checked before your chemotherapy to ensure that it is safe to proceed with that treatment. You will then book into the chemotherapy unit and will be called for your treatment as soon as your blood count has been checked and the chemotherapy is ready.

Where is the treatment given?
Intravenous chemotherapy is given by experienced chemotherapy nurses, who work as part of a team with the doctors and other trained staff. Most chemotherapy is given intravenously in the Chemotherapy Day Unit (within the Department of Radiotherapy & Oncology) and Ward 19 at The James Cook University Hospital or the Mowbray Suite at the Friarage Hospital, Northallerton.

You will find the atmosphere very friendly and the staff are always happy to listen and to help you with any concerns. We will help you to achieve the best possible health and quality of life during your chemotherapy treatment and patients are welcome to telephone and ask for advice whenever needed. (please see supplementary information or contact card).

Some treatments require chemotherapy over a longer period of time, which may necessitate admission to the ward. Oral chemotherapy is supplied by the hospital but is taken at home over a number of days.

We use many different types of chemotherapy and many different regimens. Each dose of chemotherapy is made individually for each person, and where possible this is done in advance of you attending for your chemotherapy.
However, in some cases the chemotherapy cannot be made up until the day of treatment, and in some cases we need to wait for the blood count before the chemotherapy is prepared. There may therefore be a delay in you receiving your treatment for these reasons, but we do try to minimise these delays as much as possible.

**Should I take my normal medication before chemotherapy?**

Yes, definitely. All your regular medication should be taken as normal.

**How long will the chemotherapy take to be given?**

This depends on which drugs and which regime is being given. In all cases, anti-sickness injections are given before the chemotherapy drugs. Some chemotherapies are given as a slow injection into the vein and some are given as a drip. We will explain exactly how your drugs are given before you start the treatment.

**Side effects of chemotherapy**

Not everyone receiving chemotherapy will experience side effects, and many newer drugs and regimens are well tolerated. However, everyone is different and will have a different reaction to the treatment.

Most side effects are temporary and will disappear once the treatment has finished. Although the side effects can be unpleasant, we now have good drugs to control many of them, and we have to balance the possible side effects of the treatment with the possible benefits we are trying to achieve. There are a number of side effects that many of the chemotherapy drugs cause, and these are discussed below. Most drugs also cause some more specific side effects, and these will be discussed separately.

**Blood count**

The most serious side effect of chemotherapy is its effect on the blood count. There are cells in the blood called white cells, which fight infections. Most chemotherapy will reduce the number of white cells in the blood, and so you will be more susceptible to picking up infections. If you do pick up an infection your body will be less able to fight it and so you will have to come to the hospital to be treated with antibiotics. It is vital that you do not delay in seeking attention at the hospital if you think you may have an infection. In particular, look for:

- high temperature
- sweating
- new symptoms such as coughing
- feeling more unwell

If you think you may have an infection, please do not hesitate to contact the hospital straight away - see supplementary information or contact card.
Chemotherapy can also affect the red cells in the blood, making you feel tired. If the red cells become too low and you become anaemic, you may require a blood transfusion.

The blood also contains platelets which help the blood to clot. If the platelets become low as a result of chemotherapy you may bruise more easily or have nose bleeds. If you notice any of these problems please tell a doctor or nurse.

**Sickness**

Most chemotherapies can cause some nausea or sickness, but not all. For those that are known to cause nausea or vomiting, anti-sickness injections will be given before the chemotherapy, and anti-sickness tablets will be given to you to take at home over the next few days.

**Mouth**

The mouth and tongue can become sore or ulcers may develop. It is important to keep the mouth clean, so clean teeth regularly and dentures thoroughly and use a mouthwash regularly. If you do get a sore mouth it is important to keep drinking plenty of fluids, and to eat a soft diet if possible. Unfortunately chemotherapy often causes a change in taste, with food tasting metallic or bitter.

**Hair loss**

Not all chemotherapies cause hair loss, but unfortunately some do. If you do lose your hair it will regrow once the treatment has finished. If you are receiving intravenous injections of chemotherapy, you can try to prevent hair loss by using a cold cap. This cools the scalp so preventing the chemotherapy from reaching the hair follicle cells, and in some people the amount of hair loss can be reduced. However, some people cannot tolerate the cold cap, and in some people it is not effective.

If you wish to consider the cold cap please ask your doctor if it would be appropriate.

**Bowels**

Some chemotherapy treatments can affect your bowel habits and may cause diarrhoea or constipation. This may be best controlled by medication but it is also very important to drink plenty of fluids.

**Tiredness**

Most people do feel more tired on chemotherapy, and this usually increases as you go through your chemotherapy. Try to take things easy while you are on your treatment, and let family and friends help out with shopping, cooking, cleaning etc.

**Infertility**

Chemotherapy may cause infertility for both men and women, which may be temporary or permanent. If this is a concern you should discuss it fully with your consultant, with your partner present. It may be possible for men to have sperm banking, where sperm is collected before treatment is started and stored for future use. For women, chemotherapy may affect
the menstrual cycle, with periods becoming irregular or stopping altogether.

**Pregnancy should be avoided during chemotherapy, and reliable contraception is therefore essential.**

**Skin changes**
Chemotherapy can sometimes cause redness and irritation to the skin where the drugs were injected into your body. If you notice any changes to this area such as redness, pain, blistering or swelling, then please contact us as soon as possible.

**Appetite**
Chemotherapy treatments may affect your eating patterns, appetite and taste. If you are eating smaller portions, missing meals and losing weight, try to eat foods that are more nourishing for example use full fat products (yoghurts, milk, puddings) ...

- try creamy soups and adding extra cheese, milk, cream and butter into cooking
- try to eat ‘little and often’ rather than keeping to traditional meal times. Eat what you fancy, when you fancy
- healthy eating is not a priority at this time.

If you continue to lose weight and your appetite does not improve, you should discuss this with a member of your health care team; they can refer you to a dietitian who will be able to provide more specific advice.

**Emotional needs**
Your emotional well-being is as important to us as your physical health. Everyone needs support of some kind during difficult periods. Facing up to cancer and its treatments can be one of the most stressful situations you are ever likely to face. During chemotherapy some people feel stressed, anxious, depressed and at times unable to cope. Please let someone know if that is how you are feeling. We can then offer appropriate help and advice, and we may be able to refer you to a specially trained member of the team to help you feel better.

Many find that their interest in sex diminishes while having chemotherapy. This is caused by general anxieties and lack of energy, and will return to normal once the treatment is over, and you have recovered from it.

**How can I help myself?**
- Keep a positive attitude; find out as much as you want to know about your disease and its treatment - take an active part in tackling your disease.
- Have plenty of rest and relaxation; learning to relax can help some people through difficult times - consider relaxation tapes, meditation, yoga etc.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Take some regular exercise - this will help to relieve tension and is good for your morale.
- Tell us if you have any problems - it is better to share them.
What happens after my treatment is finished?
The effects of the chemotherapy will gradually wear off, and you will find that you start to feel back to normal. For most people this will take a few weeks so you must continue to look after yourself during this time, eating well, and resting if you feel tired.

Follow up
After your chemotherapy has finished you will be given an appointment for a follow up with your consultant, usually at the hospital where you saw the oncologist for the first consultation. This visit will give you the opportunity to discuss any problems or worries that may have arisen and to see how the side effects are settling down. You will continue to be followed up by your consultant, but how often you have these visits will depend on your tumour, your consultant and who else has been involved in your care. Usually the visits will become less frequent as time goes by.

Your consultant will keep in contact with your own doctor so he or she knows about your progress.

Some people expect to have regular blood tests, x-rays or scans after treatment but often this is not necessary. If you have any questions about this please ask.

Contact us
Please do not hesitate to contact your chemotherapy day unit for advice - see supplementary information or contact card.

Useful contacts
The Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre, North Entrance, The James Cook University Hospital (telephone 01642 835674) and Mowbray Suite, Friarage Hospital, Northallerton (telephone 01609 764033) offer a drop in centre for benefits advice, cancer information and practical or emotional support to anyone who has cancer, their relatives, friends and carers.

For further information, please see supplementary information or speak to a member of your health care team.

Macmillan help line (freephone 0808 808 00 00) Monday to Friday 9.00am to 8.00pm via email www.macmillan.org.uk

Hard of hearing? Use textphone 0808 808 0121 or Text Replay

Non English speaker? Interpreters are available.

NHS Direct - www.nhsdirect.uk

Other useful numbers and helplines
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Comments, compliments, concerns or complaints

South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is concerned about the quality of care you receive and strives to maintain high standards of health care.

However we do appreciate that there may be an occasion where you, or your family, feel dissatisfied with the standard of service you receive. Please do not hesitate to tell us about your concerns as this helps us to learn from your experience and to improve services for future patients.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

This service aims to advise and support patients, families and carers and help sort out problems quickly on your behalf.

This service is available, and based, at The James Cook University Hospital but also covers the Friarage Hospital in Northallerton, our community hospitals and community health services. Please ask a member of staff for further information.