

Short Term Side Effects of Chemotherapy

Some of the most common short-term side effects of chemotherapy are hair loss (alopecia), nausea and vomiting. The side effects that you have depends on the chemotherapy drugs you are given.

Hair loss (alopecia)

Hair loss (also called alopecia) is a well-known side effect of chemotherapy. Hair loss occurs all over the body, though it's most visible on your head. Using a gentle shampoo and washing your hair less often may reduce hair loss.

With some chemotherapy drugs (including anthracyclines such as doxorubicin, and taxanes such as paclitaxel or docetaxel) you almost always lose your hair.

Coping with hair loss

During treatment, you will be managing many emotions. (Deal with many emotional aspects of having cancer). Hair loss can be especially trying. As with surgery, losing your hair can feel like an "assault" on another part of your body that is tied to your identity.

Wigs, hats and scarves may help you cope with hair loss. If you are thinking about wearing a wig, you may want to buy one before you start chemotherapy. Many insurance plans cover all or part of the cost of a wig for people getting chemotherapy if the claim includes a health care provider's prescription or letter.

Some people cut or actually shave off all of their hair once they start chemotherapy to prepare for the loss of their hair. This may help you feel in control and ease those that are close to you into your new look at your own pace.

When will hair grow back?

Hair will begin to grow back two to three months after treatment ends, though it may be a different color and/or texture than it was before .It often comes in curlier and grayer. Hair texture will return to normal over many months. You can dye or color your hair whenever you like.

Nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting are common side effects of chemotherapy. But, there are anti-nausea medications that help many people. Your health care

provider will give you prescriptions for anti-nausea medicines and instructions on how to use them. The anti-nausea medications you are prescribed will depend on the chemotherapy drugs you are given.

Fingernail and toenail weakness

Some chemotherapy drugs (such as paclitaxel and docetaxel) often cause damage to the fingernails and toenails. The nails may:

- Become brittle and sore
- Develop ridges
- Become more pigmented (get darker)
- Fall off

Like hair loss, nail problems are temporary. Keeping your nails short during treatment can make nail care easier. Your nails will return to normal once chemotherapy ends.

Pain

Chemotherapy drugs (including vinorelbine, cisplatin and taxanes such as paclitaxel and docetaxel) may cause nerve damage. If this happens, you may feel a burning or shooting pain (neuropathy) or numbness, usually in your fingers or toes. These side effects almost always go away after chemotherapy ends, though it may take weeks or months. In rare cases, the numbness or pain can persist.

Chemotherapy can also cause muscle pain (myalgia) or numbness. If you have these side effects, tell your health care provider right away. He/she may want to adjust your chemotherapy plan to ease these symptoms.

Mouth and throat sores (mucositis, stomatitis)

Some chemotherapy drugs (including doxorubicin and docetaxel) can harm the tissue that lines your mouth and throat, causing sores (called mucositis or stomatitis). These sores can make it painful to eat or drink. Mouth sores go away once chemotherapy ends, however if you have any pain or see any problems in your mouth or throat, contact your health care provider. He/she can prescribe a special mouthwash or other medicine to relieve pain and treat the sores. Also available are non-prescription mouth rinses and sprays.

Anemia

Chemotherapy can cause a drop in red blood cells (anemia). Anemia can greatly affect your quality of life by causing fatigue and shortness of breath. It can also make you look pale. Severe anemia can be treated with a blood transfusion. Growth factors, such as erythropoietin (Procrit, Epogen and

Aranesp) and similar drugs can increase red blood cell count.

Chemotherapy can also cause a drop in the white blood cell count which places the body at increased risk of infection (leukopenia/neutropenia). Many chemotherapy combinations include white blood cell growth factors such as filgrastim (Neupogen) and pegfilgrastim (Neulasta). These growth factors help maintain white blood cell counts and reduce the risk of infection. Growth factors are given by injection. Your nurse can inject these medicines, or you can learn to give yourself the injection.

Other short-term side effects

Chemotherapy drugs can cause other short-term side effects, including:

- Diarrhea
- Temporary loss of menstrual periods (amenorrhea)
- Infections
- Weight gain
- Fatigue
- Sleep disorders

Some of these side effects, such as loss of menstrual periods, may last after treatment ends. Learn about the long-term side effects of chemotherapy.