

Chemotherapy Treatment

Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to destroy cancer cells. Chemotherapy helps reduce the number of cancer cells and shrink tumors. Chemotherapy is given to breast cancer patients to add to the chance of cure from surgery, or to reduce pain during later, more advanced disease (Stage IV).

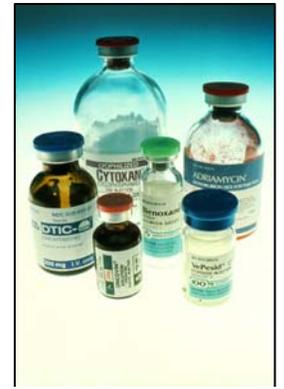


Image: National Cancer Institute

Chemotherapy is usually given in cycles: a treatment period is followed by a recovery period, then another treatment period, and so on. The cycles can last for a period of weeks or months. Chemotherapy can be given to a patient at the clinic, in the hospital or even sometimes at home. Where it is given depends on which drugs are given and your general health. Chemotherapy is typically performed so that a patient does not stay overnight in the hospital. However, if you experience excessive vomiting as a side effect during your chemotherapy treatments, you may need to be in the hospital overnight to receive IV fluids (fluids put into your body by a needle and tube). However, this is very unlikely.

Chemotherapy drugs for breast cancer are given by mouth or by injection into a vein. During the procedure you'll be given the chemotherapy medication by the way your physician thinks best. At the same time, you may be given other medications to fight the side effects of chemotherapy. These include fluids put into the vein, allergy medications, anti-nausea medications, sedatives, antibiotics, and medicine for blood growth.



Image: National Cancer Institute; Linda Bartlett, Photographer

How much time the chemotherapy session takes depends on the way it is given and the number and amount of medications. A session may be as brief as swallowing a pill or it may take several hours.

Talk to your doctor about the type of chemotherapy you are getting. Discuss your concerns and experiences. This will help your doctors and nurses help you.

Chemotherapy drugs may cause a number of uncomfortable side effects that can usually be avoided by fluids and supportive medication. However, the actual chemotherapy session does not usually hurt.

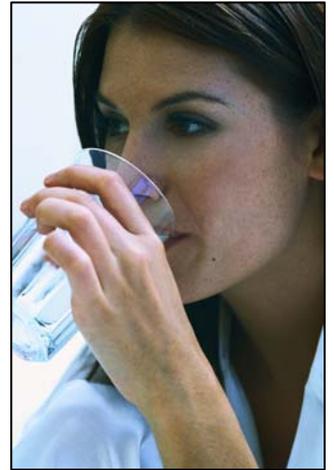
After chemotherapy treatment:

You may be given medications to take at home to make you more comfortable, such as anti-nausea drugs and injection shots to sustain blood count.

Take injection shots if your doctor prescribes them. These shots will help you to keep enough white blood cells and fight infections. Try to avoid people with contagious diseases, particularly children. A viral illness like the cold or flu can strongly affect a patient whose immune system is weakened by the chemotherapy. A healthy immune system is what helps the body fight disease.



After chemotherapy sessions, get a lot of sleep. Try to eat as healthfully as possible, even though you may not have an appetite. Drink lots of fluids to avoid dehydration and to flush the medications out of your kidneys as quickly as possible.



If you have later, more advanced cancer (Stage IV disease), then your doctor may order some of the following tests to see the progress of your chemotherapy treatment: blood tests, urine tests, X-rays, ultrasound (a test that uses sound waves to find tumors), MRI scan (a test that uses magnetic waves to make pictures of the inside of the body), CT scan (a type of x-ray that uses a computer to make pictures of the inside of the body), bone scans (a type of x-ray that shows areas of unusual activity in bones), or bone marrow biopsies (the removal of a sample of bone marrow for examination; marrow is the middle part of the bone where blood is made).