

What Causes Side Effects?

Because cancer cells grow and divide rapidly, anticancer drugs are made to kill fast-growing cells. But certain normal, healthy cells also multiply quickly, and chemotherapy affects these cells, as it cannot differentiate between the cancer and normal cells. When it does, side effects may result. The fast-growing, normal cells most likely to be affected are blood cells forming in the bone marrow and cells in the digestive tract, reproductive system, and hair follicles. Anticancer drugs can also damage cells of the heart, kidney, bladder, lungs, and nervous system. The most common side effects of chemotherapy include nausea and vomiting, hair loss, and fatigue. Other common side effects include an increased chance of bleeding, getting an infection, or developing anaemia. These side effects result from changes in blood cells during chemotherapy.

How Long Do Side Effects Last? Do the side effects last lifetime?

Most normal cells recover quickly when chemotherapy is over, so most side effects gradually disappear after treatment ends, and the healthy cells have a chance to grow normally. The time it takes to get over some side effects and regain energy varies from person to person. How soon you will feel better depends on many factors, including your overall health and the kinds of drugs you have been taking.

While many side effects go away fairly rapidly, certain ones may take months or years to disappear completely. Sometimes, the side effects can last a lifetime, as when chemotherapy causes permanent damage to the heart, lungs, kidneys, or reproductive organs. And certain types of chemotherapy occasionally may cause delayed effects, such as a second cancer, that show up many years later.

It is important to remember that many people have no long-term problems due to chemotherapy. It also is reassuring to know that doctors are making great progress in preventing some of chemotherapy's more serious side effects. For instance they are using many new drugs and techniques that increase chemotherapy's powerful effects on cancer cells while decreasing its harmful effects on the body's healthy cells.

My side effects are too much to bear. Do I need to continue chemotherapy?

The side effects of chemotherapy can be unpleasant, but they must be measured against the treatment's ability to destroy cancer. People getting chemotherapy sometimes become discouraged about the length of time their treatment is taking or the side effects they are having. If that happens to you, talk to your doctor. It may be that your medication or the treatment schedule can be changed. Or your doctor may be able to suggest ways to reduce side effects or make them easier to tolerate. Remember though, your doctor will not ask you to continue treatments unless the expected benefits outweigh any problems you might have. On the pages that follow, you will find suggestions for dealing with some of the more common side effects of chemotherapy.