

*Video transcript*

# Chemotherapy Side Effects

Cancer Centre of  
Southeastern Ontario

A Cancer Care Ontario Partner

Kingston Health  
Sciences Centre

Centre des sciences de  
la santé de Kingston

Welcome to this video on chemotherapy side effects. This video is one of a series of videos designed to provide you with information about your chemotherapy treatment experience.

In this video we are going to talk about the symptoms that you may experience as a result of the side-effects from your chemotherapy treatment. Here are some general things to keep in mind as we discuss the possible side effects associated with chemotherapy.

It's important to remember that everyone reacts differently to chemotherapy.

In fact even people who are taking the same kind of chemotherapy may react differently. The presence or absence of side effects depends on the type of chemotherapy, the dose and how your body reacts to the treatment. You may experience none or some of the side effects that we will discuss in this video.

## How to call for Help (1:00)

Before we talk about possible side effects, we want to remind you how you can call your cancer care team for help if you have any questions, concerns or a change in your condition.

- During the hours of operation Monday to Friday 8:30a.m. to 4 p.m. call 613-549-6666 or Toll Free 1-800-567-5733 and enter the extension for your cancer doctor's medical secretary. The extension for your cancer doctor is located on the business card that was provided to you at your initial consult. The medical secretary will direct your call to the appropriate care provider.
- Outside of these hours including holidays and weekends, if there is a change in your condition or if you need help managing your cancer treatment symptoms call the same number 613-549-6666 and push 0 to speak to the operator or Toll Free 1-800-567-5722. Tell the operator your cancer doctor's name and they will reach the on-call doctor for you. The on-call cancer doctor will return your call. If you are treated in Belleville follow the instructions provided to you.

- In the event of a medical emergency call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

## Common Side Effects (2:07)

The most common side effects of chemotherapy are:

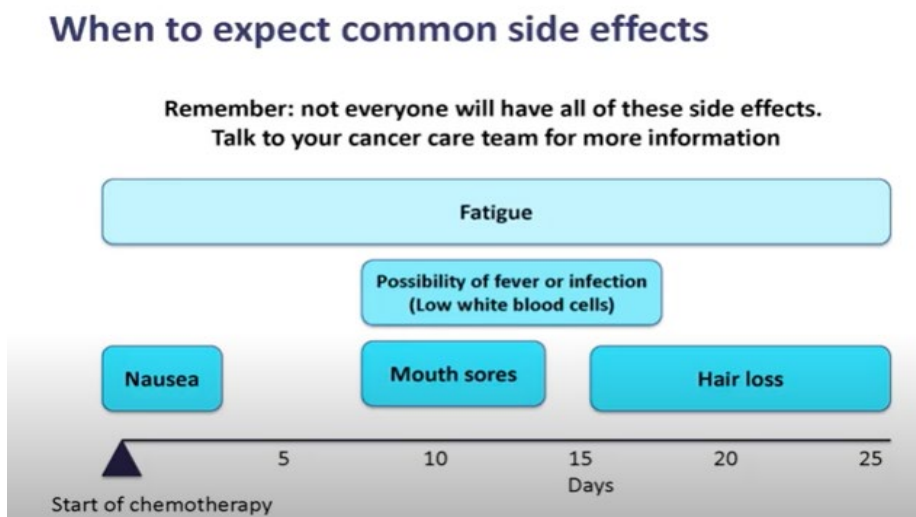
- Low blood counts
- Nausea and vomiting
- Hair loss
- Skin and nail changes
- Fatigue
- Bowel changes
- Mouth changes
- Sexual changes

Each of these side effects will be explained in more detail throughout this video.

The biggest part of managing side-effects is understanding them so we will go over three important parts for each side-effect listed here.

- What to watch for and what to expect
- What you can do to manage and or prevent the side effect
- How to respond if you experience these side effects and when to get medical help.

Not all side effects will occur at the same time. This visual below gives you a quick summary of when you can expect certain side effects to occur during your first treatment cycle:



## Infection (3:06)

One possible side effect of chemotherapy that is **extremely important to watch for is infection**. An infection may be a result of low levels of white blood cells caused by the chemotherapy. White blood cells are involved in your immune response.

### Risk of Infection

Here are some possible signs of infection as well as how you should respond if you experience these symptoms:

- If you have a temperature of 38.3 degrees Celsius (100.9°F) OR HIGHER once OR
- 38.0 degrees Celsius (100.4°F) for over an hour

You may have an infection and **you should visit the nearest emergency department immediately**. Be sure to bring your fever card so you can be triaged and cared for appropriately by the emergency department.

The following symptoms may also be signs of infection:

- Loose bowel movements
- Chills or sweating
- Sore throat
- Mouth sores open
- Burning or frequent urination
- Areas that appear red or swollen
- Severe cough

If you experience these symptoms, call your cancer care team immediately. Do not wait until your next appointment to report these symptoms. If you're unable to reach your team visit the nearest emergency department.

### Prevention

There are some things that you can do to help minimize the risk of infection:

**Wash your hands often** - especially after eating and after going to the bathroom. Carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer for when you can't get to the sink.

**Avoid anyone who has a cold the flu or an infectious disease** - anything that can be passed from person to person.

**Check your temperature daily** and at any time you feel hot or unwell, for example chills, before you take your temperature. Avoid taking medications that treat a fever such as Tylenol. These medications may hide a fever.

## Bruising and Bleeding (4:57)

It is also very important to watch for bruising and unusual bleeding. These symptoms may be a result of low platelet counts caused by the chemotherapy. Platelets play an important role in blood clotting.

Watch for the following symptoms that may occur 7 to 14 days after chemotherapy:

- **Bruising** without enough platelets. You may get bruises even when you haven't bumped into anything
- **Small red dots on skin** these are called petechiae

## What to Look For

Any of the following types of bleeding would be unusual and may indicate low levels of platelets:

- Unusual or heavy nosebleeds
- Red or pink urine
- Red or brown colored sputum or vomit
- Black tar-like stools
- Blood in stool
- Dizziness, constant headache or blurred vision (this may mean that you have bleeding in your head)
- Bleeding from your gums
- Heavy vaginal bleeding

***If you experience these symptoms, call your cancer care team immediately. Do not wait until your next appointment to report these symptoms. If you're unable to reach your team visit the nearest emergency department.***

## Prevention

Here are some things that you can do to help prevent bleeding:

- Use a soft toothbrush
- If you floss do so gently
- Use an electric razor so you are less likely to cut yourself
- Avoid activities that may result in injury
- Do not take aspirin/ibuprofen, herbal supplements or any new medications without speaking to your cancer care team first as some medications can increase your risk of bleeding

## **Anemia (6:31)**

Another important thing to watch for is signs of anemia which can result from low levels of red blood cells caused by the chemotherapy. Red blood cells carry oxygen throughout the body. The following symptoms may be signs of anemia:

- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches
- Ringing in your ears

***If you experience these symptoms, call your cancer care team immediately. Do not wait until your next appointment to report these symptoms. If you're unable to reach your team visit the nearest emergency department.***

## **Fatigue (7:02)**

Another possible symptom of anemia is fatigue. Fatigue can also be a general side effect of chemotherapy. The fatigue associated with chemotherapy is more severe and lasts longer than ordinary fatigue. You do not need to immediately contact your cancer care team if you feel tired but you should document this side-effect and let them know at your next clinic visit.

The following strategies can help you manage your fatigue:

- Get plenty of rest
- Keep activity times short with rest periods in between
- Avoid heavy or strenuous work or exercise
- Try light exercise like walking\*
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Drink lots of fluids

*\* Studies have shown that exercise helps to combat fatigue.*

## Nausea and Vomiting (7:51)

Nausea and vomiting can occur before, during or after chemotherapy but most commonly occurs one to two days following treatment.

If you experience nausea or vomiting your first course of action is to take the anti nausea medication that you have been prescribed by your doctor.

- Your doctor may prescribe a scheduled medication. You would take this according to the schedule prescribed by your doctor whether or not you experience any nausea or vomiting.
- You may also be prescribed an as needed nausea medication. You should take these medications in response to any feelings of nausea but do not need to take them if you experience no symptoms.
- You should keep track of when you feel nauseous and tell your cancer care team at your next visit. In some cases you may experience nausea or vomiting despite taking the prescribed medications.

***If you experience either nausea for more than 48 hours or vomiting for more than 24 hours call your cancer care team. If you are unable to reach them visit the nearest emergency department.***

## Prevention or Management

Here are some tips for managing or preventing nausea:

- Eat smaller meals and snacks more often during the day
- Sip water juices and other fluids during the day
- Let other people do the cooking
- Avoid spicy foods or foods with strong smells

For more information on nausea and vomiting see the [Cancer Care Ontario patient information guide](#).

## Mouth Changes (9:23)

Some chemotherapy can lead to soreness in the mouth and throat area around 7 to 14 days after treatment. Symptoms to watch for include:

- Mouth sores
- Redness in your mouth or on your tongue
- Pain
- Difficulty when swallowing
- White patches in your mouth or on your tongue
- Taste changes

If you have an open sore in your mouth contact your cancer care team to let them know as this could lead to an infection.

## **Prevention**

Here are some ways that you can help minimize your chances of developing mouth sores:

- Use a soft toothbrush and waxed dental floss
- Remove dentures if your gums are tender
- Avoid mouthwashes with alcohol as they can dry out your mouth
- Use a baking soda mouth rinse
- Avoid alcohol and spicy or acidic foods and liquids

## **Taste Changes (10:18)**

Some people develop taste changes when they are on chemotherapy. The taste changes are sometimes described as:

- A metallic taste
- A lack of taste or blandness, or
- Things tasting differently than they used to

Taste changes usually stop about three to four weeks after the end of treatment. While there are often no specific treatments, you should discuss any changes in taste with your cancer care team at your next visit.

## **Prevention**

Here are some tips for managing taste changes:

- Keep your mouth moist for example sipping water throughout the day or sucking on ice chips
- Try sugar-free mint gum or hard candies with flavors such as mint, lemon or orange to mask a bitter or metallic taste in the mouth
- Use plastic utensils and glass cookware to lessen a metallic taste
- Experiment with foods spices and seasonings herbs, sugar, lemon or sauces

## **Bowel Issues (11:16)**

Some patients may experience bowel issues as a side effect of chemotherapy such as diarrhea or constipation.

## **Diarrhea**

Having soft, loose or watery stools more than 3 times a day is a sign of diarrhea.

Here are some tips for managing diarrhea:

- Rest and drink lots of fluids like water juice and sports drinks
- Try to avoid caffeine and carbonated drinks as they can make your body lose more fluids
- Avoid natural laxatives such as prunes, rhubarb and papaya
- Eat small meals often

***While these strategies may help, if you have 6 to 8 or more loose bowel movements daily for more than 2 days you should immediately call your cancer care team or visit the nearest emergency department if they are unavailable.***

## Constipation

Less frequent bowel movements, hard or dry stool or painful bowel movements are signs of constipation. Here are some tips for managing constipation:

- ask your doctor about laxatives or stool softeners
- drink lots of fluids
- eat more fiber foods (whole-grain breads fruits and vegetables)

If you have not had a bowel movement for 3 or more days you should call your cancer care team.

## Nutrition (12:33)

Nutrition is an important part of your cancer treatment. Eating well can help you to maintain your body weight, improve your energy and strength, decrease the risk of infection and assist your body with healing and recovery from cancer treatments. Eating well can be difficult depending on the type of cancer you have and the treatments that you receive.

## Nutrition Support

Registered dietitians are available to help you meet your nutritional needs before, during and after chemotherapy.

A registered dietitian will provide a nutrition assessment and help you set realistic goals, and help you to manage symptoms or side effects related to cancer and treatments such as:

- unintentional weight loss
- sore or dry mouth
- loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Trouble swallowing
- Vomiting, diarrhea or constipation
- Taste changes

They will also help with nutrition support if needed during your treatment.

You can ask a member of your cancer care team to refer you to a registered dietitian or you can self-refer by contacting the number provided in your patient binder.



## Hair Loss (13:37)

Some chemotherapy may cause hair loss. This can occur on all parts of the body. Hair loss can be difficult both physically and emotionally.

Some patients have found the following tips helpful for managing the physical side effects:

- be gentle with your hair
- use mild shampoo
- avoid hair dryers, dye, perms or straighteners
- protect your scalp from the sun
- try to use a satin pillowcase

In terms of the emotional effects here are some strategies and supports:

- some patients have said that getting a short haircut before starting treatment can lessen the emotional impact of hair loss
- there are free hand knitted hats in the chemo treatment area and patient and Family Resource Center
- the [Look Good Feel Better program](#) runs every month in Kingston and frequently in Belleville

*“I did not worry so much about receiving chemotherapy but more about what would happen after treatment. I worried about what my side effects would be, and when they would appear, and how my family would deal with all of this. How was I going to change because of the treatments? How would my little grandson react as I experience side effects such as hair loss? Hair loss, that was huge, but knowing that it was going to happen helped. I visited a boutique to arrange for a wig ahead of my ultimate loss. There was an offer to cut my hair, shave my head when my hair loss began. This was such a support. This meant I had a plan and this became so important to me early on.”*

- Patti Cox, Former Cancer Centre Patient

## Skin and Nails (15:13)

Certain chemotherapies may lead to changes in your skin and nails.

Watch for the following symptoms in your skin:

- red or itchy skin
- dry or flaky skin

You may see the following changes in your nails:

- they may become darker
- they may become yellow
- they may become brittle or cracked.

If you notice any of these changes let your team know at your next visit.

The following tips may help you manage these changes:

- bath in warm water instead of hot water so that your skin does not dry out
- wash and moisturize your skin using alcohol free and exfoliant free soaps creams and lotions made for sensitive skin
- avoid direct sunlight
- use sunscreens with an SPF of 30 or greater
- use cuticle cream instead of cutting the cuticles of your nails

## **Fatigue (16:05)**

Fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer treatment. People describe cancer related fatigue as a feeling of tiredness or lack of energy that does not go away with sleep or rest. Cancer-related fatigue tends to be more severe and lasts longer. Most people with cancer will experience cancer related fatigue at some point along their journey. For many it can be very distressing.

Some ways to reduce or manage fatigue and help yourself feel better:

- Be active. If possible aim to get 30 minutes of moderate gentle exercise
- Start slowly and go at your own pace
- Pace yourself, do not rush
- Put off less important activities
- Listen to your body, rest when you need to
- Eat well and stay hydrated by drinking at least six to eight glasses of liquids everyday
- Use tips from the [How to Manage Your Fatigue](#) patient guide

Fatigue may continue after your treatment finishes. Keep your nurse and doctor up to date on how fatigue is affecting you.

## **Sexual Side Effects (17:10)**

Chemotherapy may result in sexual side-effects. These may differ between men and women and some may be physical, while others may be emotional.

Women may experience the following physical side effects:

- Vaginal dryness
- Early menopause
- Painful intercourse

Men may experience:

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- difficulty achieving an erection
- difficulty achieving orgasm

If you experience any of these symptoms you can discuss them with your cancer care team.

Another possible physical effect is that a small amount of chemotherapy may be present in semen or vaginal fluids after treatment. It is important that a condom is used during sexual activity for 7 days following treatment. Birth control is used if you are able to get pregnant as chemotherapy drugs can harm a fetus.

In terms of emotional effects common symptoms include:

- loss of desire, interest in sex
- feeling too worried, stressed or depressed to have sex

If you experience these symptoms you can also talk to your cancer care team or a social worker.

It is also important to be open and honest with your spouse or partner and talk about your feelings and concerns.

### **Infertility**

Chemotherapy may also cause infertility in some instances. If you plan to have children in the future or think you may want to, talk to your cancer care team before starting treatment.

## **Safe Handling of Body Fluids (18:37)**

Finally we would like to end by giving some basic instructions about safe handling of your body fluids while you're on chemotherapy.

Patients are required to safely handle any bodily fluids for 7 days after each chemotherapy treatment.

Your bodily fluids include:

- Urine
- Vomit
- Stool
- Blood
- Semen and vaginal fluid

The reason for safe handling is because small amounts of chemotherapy are in these bodily fluids.

Chemotherapy works to treat your cancer but it can be harmful to others if they come in contact with even a small amount.

This is why you will see nurses in the chemotherapy treatment area who administer your chemotherapy wearing protective gear.

Safe handling precautions you should take for 7 days after each chemotherapy treatment include:

- Flush the toilet twice after use with the lid down
- Double-bag soiled disposable items
- Sit on the toilet when urinating
- Wash any linens soiled with vomit or urine twice in your washing machine and separate from other laundry
- Wear a condom during sexual activity
- Caregivers should wear gloves if cleaning up or handling soiled items

It is important to remember that hugging and kissing is safe. You can still be around small children and pets.

This concludes video 3 of our Chemotherapy Patient Education series. If you have any additional questions about chemotherapy side-effects, you can contact your cancer care team. If you want to learn more about chemotherapy and your treatment experience at the Cancer Center of Southeastern Ontario, check out our website for more videos and resources.

## Contact us

Phone: 613-549-6666

Toll Free: 1-800-567-5722

[www.CancerCareSouthEast.ca](http://www.CancerCareSouthEast.ca)

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