

Greenwich Hospital
C H E M O T H E R A P Y

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is the use of medication (or drugs) to kill cancer cells. This medication is often called “chemo.” The doctor may use one drug or a combination of drugs. Chemotherapy may be the only kind of treatment a patient needs, or it may be combined with other forms of treatment.

How is chemotherapy administered?

Most chemotherapy is given by injection into a vein through an intravenous catheter (IV). Alternatively, chemotherapy can be injected into a muscle or under the skin or taken by mouth. Usually a patient has chemotherapy as an outpatient, but on occasion chemotherapy may be administered in the hospital. A short hospital stay may be necessary depending on several factors such as which drugs are given, the dose, how they are given, and the patient’s general health.

Chemotherapy is usually given in cycles. A cycle includes a treatment period (one or more days when treatment is given) followed by a recovery period (several days or weeks), then another treatment period, and so on.

What are some of the side effects of chemotherapy?

The side effects of chemotherapy depend mainly on the drugs and the doses the patient receives. The side effects vary from person to person. Generally, chemotherapy affects cells that divide rapidly. In addition to cancer cells, blood cells also divide rapidly and may be affected by chemotherapy. Blood cells fight infection, help the blood to clot, and carry oxygen to all parts of the body. When blood cells are affected by chemotherapy, patients are more likely to get infections, to bruise or bleed easily, and to feel unusually weak and tired. Rapidly dividing cells in hair roots and cells that line the digestive tract may also be affected. Side effects may include loss of hair, poor appetite, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, or mouth and lip sores. If you experience side effects or have questions about chemotherapy side effects, contact your physician.

For more information on chemotherapy or cancer, contact your physician or The American Cancer Society at 1.800.889.3340.

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patient Services, then Patient Education.