

Cancer Treatment – Side Effects and How to Manage Them

Because cancer therapy often damages healthy cells and tissues, side effects are common. Side effects depend mainly on the type and extent of the treatment. They may not be the same for each person, and they may change from one treatment session to the next. However, they can be reduced or, in some cases, even prevented with the right precautions. Most go away when treatment ends.

At any stage of the disease, supportive care is available to relieve the side effects of treatment, to control pain and other symptoms, and to help you cope with the feelings that a cancer diagnosis can bring.

Before you begin treatment, your health care team will explain the possible side effects and how they will help you manage them. They also will discuss how treatment may affect your normal activities. Be sure to talk to them anytime you are experiencing an unpleasant reaction or to raise questions.

We have highlighted the most common side effects experienced by patients undergoing treatment for all types of cancer.

Common Side Effects

Coping with cancer can be exhausting. The disease and the treatments you may need to fight it can take a significant toll on your body, leaving you tired and battling nausea, weight loss and a variety of other side effects. The most common side effects are described below.

Surgery

The time it takes to heal after surgery is different for each person. You may be uncomfortable for the first few days. Medicine can help control your pain. Before surgery, you should discuss the plan for pain relief with your doctor or nurse. After surgery, your doctor can adjust the plan if you need more pain relief.

It is common to feel tired or weak for a while after surgery. Your health care team will monitor you for signs of bleeding, infection or other problems requiring immediate treatment.

Chemotherapy

Side effects depend mainly on which drugs are given and how much. Chemotherapy kills fast-growing cancer cells, but the drugs also can harm normal cells that divide rapidly including:

- **Blood Cells:** These cells fight infection, help blood to clot and carry oxygen to all parts of your body. When drugs lower the levels of healthy blood cells, you are more likely to get infections, bruise or bleed easily, and feel very weak and tired. Your health care team will check for low levels of blood cells. If your levels are low, your health care team may stop the chemotherapy for a while or reduce the dose of the drug. There also are medicines that can help your body make new blood cells.

- **Cells in Hair Roots:** Chemotherapy may cause hair loss. If you lose your hair, it will grow back after treatment, but the color and texture may be changed.

- **Cells That Line the Digestive Tract:** Chemotherapy can cause a poor appetite, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, or mouth and lip sores. Your health care team can give you medicines and suggest other ways to help with these problems. Other side effects from chemotherapy are less common but still occur frequently, including:
 - Tingling or numbness in your hands and feet
 - Skin rash
 - Swollen legs and feet from your body holding extra water
 - Shortness of breath
 - Watery eyes
 - Hearing problems
 - Loss of balance
 - Joint pain
 - Memory changes (“chemo brain”)

Radiation Therapy

The side effects depend mainly on the type of radiation therapy, the dose of radiation and the part of your body that is treated. You are likely to become very tired during treatment, especially in the latter weeks of treatment. Resting is important, but doctors usually advise patients to try to stay active.

During radiation therapy, your skin in the treatment area may become red, dry and tender. You may experience cosmetic changes to your breast and they may become more dense. You may want to discuss long-term side effects with your doctor. These side effects relate to the potential for radiation affecting healthy cells in the body such as the heart or lungs.

Although the side effects of radiation therapy can be distressing, your doctor can usually treat or control them. Also, side effects usually go away after treatment ends.

Ways To Manage Side Effects

Most side effects go away when treatment ends. But some side effects may last months, years or longer. While there's no way to avoid the side effects of cancer entirely, you don't have to simply accept them. A variety of strategies, including medicines and lifestyle changes, may help you feel better.

It may take many attempts to find a treatment strategy that helps you. It is important to keep the lines of communication open with your doctor and always inform him or her when your condition changes.

Following are tips on coping with the most common side effects.

Pain

Pain can be caused by cancer, treatments for the disease or both. If you find that you are in pain, never hesitate to talk with your doctor. You will not get addicted when cancer pain medicines are given and taken in the right way. *Controlling pain is part of your cancer treatment.*

There are many strategies to help lower or get rid of pain, including medicine, surgery, massage and acupuncture. The best way to control pain is to stop it from starting or to keep it from getting worse. Being in less pain will help you sleep and eat better, feel stronger and be better able to continue with work and other activities.

Always Call your doctor or nurse if:

- The pain is not getting better or going away
- The pain comes on quickly
- The pain makes it hard to eat, sleep, work or play
- You feel new pain
- The pain medicine is not working as fast or for as long as it used to

Tips on keeping your pain under Control:

- Take the right amount of medicine each time you are supposed to.
- Take the pain medicine on time. If you take the pain medicine too late, it may not work as well.
- Tell your doctor or nurse if the pain does not go away after you take the medicine.
- Tell your doctor or nurse if you are in pain, but it's not yet time to take the pain

medicine.

- Do not stop taking the pain medicine unless your doctor tells you to.
- Talk with your doctor, nurse or social worker if you need help to pay for pain medicine.
- Give your doctor or nurse a list of all of the medicines you are taking.
- Each day, write about any pain you feel, including when it happened, what made it feel better or worse, what type of pain and how bad it was. This will help you talk with your doctor or nurse.

Nausea/vomiting

Chemotherapy and radiation treatments often cause nausea and vomiting. However, some medicines can help control the problem. Establishing certain eating habits can help, as well.

Take these steps to feel better:

- Ask your doctor or nurse for anti-nausea medicine and other steps you can take to help manage your symptoms.
- Take your anti-nausea medicine as prescribed – even on the days you are feeling well.
- Call your doctor or nurse if the medicine is not working and you still have nausea or vomiting.
- Eat five or six small meals during the day, instead of three big meals.
- Avoid greasy, fried or spicy foods. Avoid anything that makes you feel sick after eating it.
- Eat dry foods, such as crackers or toast, every few hours during the day.
- Sip clear liquids often to prevent dehydration. If you find it hard to drink a full glass at one time, take small sips of water during the day.
- Experiment with the best times for you to eat and drink, especially on the days you have treatment.

Poor Appetite

Cancer and its treatments can decrease appetite, but not eating well can cause weakness, weight loss and fatigue. Eating right can actually help your treatment.

Try these tips to make eating easier:

- Eat five or six small meals each day, instead of three big meals.
- Set times to eat a little, even if you're not hungry.

- Allow yourself to eat your favorite foods any time of day.
- Eat high-protein foods and snacks.
- Try milkshakes or soup. These foods are easy to swallow.
- Take a short walk each day. Being active may help you feel hungrier.
- Drink liquids in between meals instead of during them.
- Let your doctor or nurse know if you lose weight.

Fatigue

Fatigue is often one of the first symptoms of cancer. It may be a sign that the disease is progressing. It also may be caused by cancer treatments or be a result of other side effects such as a poor appetite. Another common cause of fatigue is anemia, a condition in which the body does not have enough red blood cells or when the blood cells do not have enough hemoglobin. Anemia can be caused by cancer, cancer treatments or other medical issues. There are medicines that can ease fatigue by helping the body make more red blood cells.

Strategies for coping with fatigue include the following:

- Do less.
- Do activities that are most important first.
- Ask others for help.
- Take time off from your job through medical leave or work fewer hours.
- Be as active as you can.
- Eat five or six small meals during the day to keep up your strength, instead of three big meals.
- Keep water with you and take small sips during the day. Most people need to drink at least eight cups of water a day.
- Listen to your body. Rest when you feel tired.
- Try to take short naps that are one hour or less during the day.
- Make a bedtime routine. Bathing, reading or listening to music before you go to sleep may help you relax.
- Sleep at least eight hours every night.

Lymphedema

This cancer complication happens most often when surgery affects lymph nodes or vessels, causing

a buildup of lymph fluid. Radiation therapy may complicate matters if radiation therapy is added after surgery or if the cancer is blocking the lymphatic flow.

Symptoms include chronic swelling, usually of the arms, hands, legs or feet. Swelling or bloating also can occur in your face, stomach or lower belly.

Treatments for lymphedema may include:

- Range-of-motion exercises
- Compression
- Drainage

Always Call Your Doctor or Nurse If You:

- Feel short of breath
- Have a heartbeat that seems different or is not regular
- Have sudden swelling or swelling that is getting worse
- Gain weight quickly
- Don't urinate at all or only a little

Take These Steps to Prevent Swelling:

- Ask about special stockings.
- Wear loose clothing and shoes that are not too tight.
- Raise your feet when you can.
- Try not to stand or walk too much at one time.
- Stay away from salt. Don't eat food such as chips, bacon, ham, or canned soups or add salt or soy sauce to your food.
- Weigh yourself at the same time every day. Tell your doctor or nurse if you gain weight.

Memory Changes

Memory changes or trouble thinking may be caused by stress or a medication you are taking. Or, they may be caused by the cancer, cancer treatment or other health problems.

In fact, one in four people with cancer reports memory and attention problems after chemotherapy.

It's often called "chemo brain." Survivors describe this as "brain fog," which can lead to problems paying attention, finding the right word or remembering new things. These changes can begin soon after treatment ends, or they may not appear until much later.

You or a family member should call your doctor or nurse if you:

- Feel confused: If you are very confused, have someone stay with you. Don't stay home alone.
- Feel very sad or depressed
- Have a hard time thinking or remembering things
- Your doctor will work to find out what is causing these problems. In the meantime, the tips below may help:
- Do things that need the most thinking at the time of day when you feel best.
- Get extra rest.
- Write down or tape record things you want to remember.
- Write down important dates and information on a calendar.
- Use a pill box or calendar to help keep track of your medications.
- Ask your nurse or social worker for help to keep track of medications and medical visits.
- Ask a friend or family member for extra help when you need it.



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