

Information resources for families

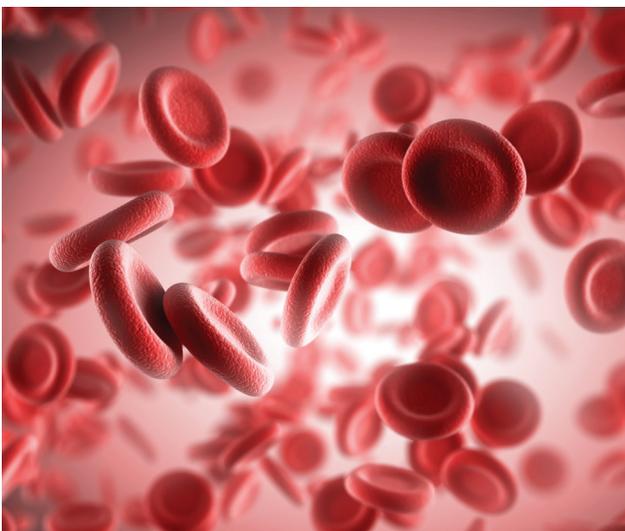
# Side effects of chemotherapy

## What causes side effects?

Chemotherapy affects cells in the body that grow quickly such as cancer cells. There are other cells in the body that also grow quickly. These cells are in the bone marrow (where blood cells are produced), the digestive system (mouth, stomach and bowels), hair and the reproductive system. Side effects occur when these quickly growing healthy cells get damaged by chemotherapy treatment. In general, the side effects from chemotherapy depend on the type and dose of chemotherapy that is given. Most side effects of treatment are temporary.

## What are the major side effects of cancer treatment?

Chemotherapy can damage blood cells produced in the bone marrow. This can result in low red blood cells (that carry oxygen), low platelets (that stop bleeding) and low white blood cells (that fight infection). Your doctor will order regular blood tests for your child and may prescribe blood transfusions from time to time. It is important to contact the hospital immediately if your child becomes unwell or has a fever 38 degrees or above. See the fact sheet 'Blood tests and blood counts' for more information.



Cancer treatment can damage cells in the digestive system causing ulcers and pain. Medication may be needed to manage the pain. Good oral hygiene can reduce the risk of infection from ulcers in the mouth. Your nursing team will provide more information about caring for your child's mouth.

Some drugs may cause diarrhoea, while others may cause constipation.

It is important to talk to your nurse or doctor about any changes in your child's bowel habits.

Nausea and vomiting can happen as a result of chemotherapy. Your treating team will work to find the best anti-nausea plan for your child. Medicines are given to treat nausea and vomiting. You will also have these medications available to use at home.

**It is important to contact the hospital immediately if your child becomes unwell or has a fever 38 degrees or above.**

Nearly all children lose their hair from treatment. The amount of hair loss will depend on the type of treatment. Hair loss generally begins two to three weeks after chemotherapy. It may all come out overnight, or take several weeks. It can range from severe thinning to complete baldness and can include body hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. Hair will always grow back but it may look different.

Side effects of chemotherapy and other cancer treatments can have an impact on your child's (and the whole family's) emotional health. Your treating team includes specialist social workers, play, music and art therapists and psychologists that can help provide support and strategies to manage these effects. Please let your treating team know if you would like to be seen by an allied health team member.

### **Where can I get more information?**

Your doctor and nurse will explain the side effects of your child's treatment. If English is not your first language, ask for an interpreter to help at these meetings. Your oncology pharmacist is a good person to ask for information on specific drugs. Remember there is no such thing as a silly question.

