



OvarianCancerAustralia

Coping with chemotherapy

An information sheet for women with ovarian cancer, their family and friends

Most women with ovarian cancer will have chemotherapy (chemo) treatment after surgery. Chemo works by killing or slowing the growth of cancer cells, but it can also damage some healthy cells in your body, which can cause a range of side effects. Side effects from chemo depend on the particular drugs used, but also vary from woman to woman and from one chemo cycle to the next. Thankfully, side effects are usually temporary and there are many things you can do to prevent or reduce them.

“I decided I wasn’t going to let the chemo impose baldness on me, so I had my head shaved before I started treatment. I suppose it was my way of taking back some control.”

Carolyn Walker
8-year survivor

“I bought or borrowed a whole heap of glamorous scarves and worked them African style piled on my head. They were a great confidence booster.”

Wanda

Hair loss

What might happen?

Paclitaxel (*Taxol*) is a drug commonly used to treat ovarian cancer. It affects the healthy cells involved in hair growth and causes temporary hair loss, which usually starts about 2 weeks after your first treatment. Hair loss is usually very rapid and you may lose hair all over your body, including eyebrows, eyelashes, arms, legs and pubic hair. Your hair will grow back once you finish the chemo, usually within weeks or months.

If you are only receiving carboplatin without paclitaxel, you may not experience hair loss.

What can help?

Women often struggle with hair loss because it is the side effect of chemo that makes their cancer obvious to the general public. It is normal to feel frightened, angry and upset about losing your hair, but it helps to remember that hair loss is almost always temporary.

When it comes to hair loss, it’s a great help to be prepared and think about ways to lessen the shock *before* you start chemo. Options that have worked for other women include:

- Cutting your hair very short before treatment.

- Finding a wig that you love (it may be something similar to your current hairstyle or something very different — just for a bit of fun).
- Expressing your personal style by buying or borrowing colourful scarves, turbans or hats.

Remember to treat your existing hair gently and to protect your skin throughout and after treatment: bald heads are very sensitive to the sun and to cold! You may find that hair and skin products without added chemicals or perfumes will suit your hair and skin better at this time.

Look Good ... Feel Better

A program called Look Good ... Feel Better can help with self-confidence during and after cancer treatment. It offers useful tips on using cosmetics to deal with changes in your skin, hair and general appearance. The 2-hour workshops are run in hospitals and cancer centres throughout Australia by beauty professionals who volunteer their time. These workshops are completely free, relaxed and friendly. Please call 1800 650 960 or visit www.lgfb.org.au to find out more.

“I drank lots of water — at least 2 litres a day (not cordial or anything else!). You MUST flush the toxins out of your kidneys.”

Carolyn

“I knew that for about 2 ½ days after my chemo I was pretty unable to do anything but lie on the couch. Don’t be too hard on yourself when you get that couple of days when you cannot do anything — just go with it.”

Wanda

Nausea and vomiting

What might happen?

Nausea and vomiting is one of the more uncomfortable side effects of chemo, affecting around half of women. Modern anti-nausea medicines mean that this side effect is much less of a problem than it was many years ago.

What can help?

All women are given anti-nausea medicine (called anti-emetics) before each cycle of chemo begins and then given medicine to take home to use for the next few days.

These medicines may cause constipation. Your doctor or oncology nurse can give you ideas on preventing and relieving constipation.

Other ideas that may help with nausea include:

- Sipping ginger beer or ginger tea — ginger has anti-nausea properties that may help.
- Acupuncture — see our *Complementary therapies* sheet for more about the benefits of acupuncture.
- The smell of cooking can often make nausea worse, so try eating cold foods or foods that only need heating for the first few days after chemo.

Risk of infection

What might happen?

Chemo can reduce the number of white blood cells in your body, and this can increase your risk of developing infections.

What can help?

Your doctor will regularly check your white blood cell count during treatment. It’s also important to call a

member of your medical team if you notice at any time that you are feeling unwell or feel like you may be getting an infection.

While you’re having chemo, try to steer clear of other people with colds, coughs and other infections.

If you need to see your GP, call ahead to let them know you are having chemo and they may be able to offer you a separate waiting area away from other patients who could be infectious.

If you do develop an infection, most can be treated effectively with antibiotics.

Tiredness

The level of red blood cells, which carry oxygen from your lungs to the rest of your body, may drop, causing you to feel tired and breathless.

What can help?

Get to know your chemo cycle and how it affects you so you can plan:

Fatigue can be an ongoing problem for many women, even when they have finished chemo. For practical ideas on coping with fatigue please see our *Staying well* information sheet.

Other problems

- Some chemo drugs may cause **numbness or tingling** in your hands and feet. This is called *peripheral neuropathy*. Let your doctor know if this happens and take great care with sharp objects and around hot water. Acupuncture and massage may help with your symptoms
- **Joint and muscle pain** is a common side effect with Taxol



and usually disappears after a few days. Talk to your

doctor or oncology nurse about pain relievers that are suitable to take if needed.

- **Mouth ulcers** are a painful and annoying side effect. Avoiding acidic foods like tomatoes and citrus will help to minimise the stinging.
- **Skin problems** may include redness, itching, dryness and breakouts. Ask your pharmacist to recommend a gentle, effective product to help.
- **Bleeding or bruising** is a rare side effect of chemo caused by a drop in blood platelets. Your doctor will keep a close eye on your platelet count during treatment, but always let them know if you are bruising more easily than usual, are bleeding from your gums or nose, or have blood in your bowel motions.

Life after chemo

Even though chemo may cause uncomfortable side effects, it's like a lifeline for many women — keeping them in touch with a range of health professionals and helping them to feel they are doing something positive about their cancer. After completing treatment, some women feel alone and begin to worry about the cancer coming back. This is when joining a support group can be really helpful. To find out about groups in your area, go to <http://www.ovariancancer.net.au/treatment-support/support-groups/>

You might like to plan a holiday to mark the end of your chemo — maybe to a sunny place? It doesn't need to be expensive or far away, just something to break the cycle of going to hospital on a regular basis. Your body and mind will thank you for it!

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Please note: The information in this sheet is not medical advice and is not intended to replace the advice of your health care professional.

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