

Top Tips for Chemotherapy

There are so many different types of cancers and their treatment plans so some top tips vary, but most of the following will be applicable:

✳ The first day of chemo for everyone is a big day. It's an emotional, scary and toxic shock to the body, so above all else - be kind to yourself. You do not need to be brave. Everything that you are feeling is normal.

✳ Set up a support network with your loved ones. This is a time to not be shy on asking for help. Whether you need a lift to your doctors, or a shoulder to cry on, there are friends and family ready to help you through this time.

✳ Rest, rest, rest. Sleep during your chemotherapy if your body is wanting to. And listen to your body when you get home. You will feel very tired. Allow others to care for you.

✳ Pack a bag of items beforehand, and don't forget the water! It is very important to drink during your chemo session. Your liver will come under pressure from the medication. The nurses can also get you water but they are often very busy. Rather be fully prepared. Keep hydrated when you are at home too - your body is going through lot's of big adjustments and needs all the help it can get.

✳ Some patients are affected by the smell and taste of chemotherapy. Chewing or sucking a mint, or finding a particular flavour that works for you, is a good top tip during treatment. Food can taste metallic or like cardboard. Use plastic cutlery instead of metallic cutlery. Try adding lemon and maple syrup to your food.

✳ Be sure to eat well on the morning of your chemotherapy. A bowl of oat porridge or an egg-based breakfast are great options. Take along healthy snacks to chemo such as dried fruit and nuts. After chemo you may find your tastebuds affected. Do not force yourself to eat but be aware that your body needs extra doses of nutrients, vitamins and minerals during this time. Eat small meals as nausea can be far worse on an empty stomach. Smoothies, freshly squeezed juices, all-natural protein shakes and soups are good ideas. Side effects also include an internal see-saw between diarrhea and constipation - be sure to include foods with fibre to help counteract this.

✳ Ginger helps some patients with nausea. Beetroot juice, chicken and broccoli can also help.

✳ Take along some distraction. What is your preferred source of entertainment? Some find listening to their favourite music helps, others love to listen to meditation. Download a streaming app like Netflix to your phone and download shows or movies. Don't forget to take along ear phones. The chemo suite should have access to WIFI, you will need to request the password with the nurses. Bring along your needlework if knitting is your hobby.

✳ Some patients like to take along a magazine or book to read, or even crosswords or games. Bear in mind, you may become sleepy. An audiobook is also a great idea for tired eyes.

✳ Pack a lap blanket for some tactile comfort. Hands and feet can feel cold during chemo sessions. A travelling neck pillow is also a great form of support when one is feeling sleepy in the chemo chair.

✳ Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes. Sessions can be long. If your treatment includes the use of a port, make sure to wear clothing that allows easy access to the port area.

✳ The chemo nurses are a special breed of angels. They have seen it all. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and express your concerns or fears. Speak up if you want to know details about your medication and health, especially if you are not feeling well. Request the number for the after hours emergency care for any panicked questions.

✳ Always stay one step ahead of the nausea. The nurses will give you the meds to take home. Symptoms will often feel worse the same night of chemo, or within the next two days.

✳ Not everyone loses their hair - this depends on the type of chemo you will be having.

✳ Watch out for your immune system. A cancer patient is highly susceptible to germs and illness so communicate clearly with your friends and family that they are not to visit you if they are sick. Doctors all have different versions of which vitamins are allowed to be taken during treatment. The thought process is that anti-oxidant supplements compete with the actions of chemotherapy. A probiotic is an option to take which will boost gut health and in turn improve the immune system. Be sure to seek advice from your doctor. Eating Grapefruit is not advised during chemotherapy.

✳ Mouth sores and oral thrush are common side effects. Purchase a bottle of antiseptic medicated mouthwash from the pharmacy before you start treatment to be able to treat the mouth sores at the first sign of a tingle. Gargling with salt water is also recommended.

✳ Dry skin and lips are also a common side effect as the body gets dehydrated. Choose natural products without synthetic fragancing or other petrochemical ingredients. A beeswax-based balm is ideal.

✳ Neuropathy (numbness & tingling in the hands and feet) is another very common side effect. A flaxseed or wheat heat bag (available from a health shop) provides heat therapy to stimulate circulation and for an achey body.

✳ Get outside as much as you can. Fresh air and sunlight are great medicine for a stuffy chemo head.

✳ Humour really does help. Try to surround yourself with light-hearted content.

✳ Keep an eye open for infections, swelling, blood pressure changes or anything else that worries you. Speak to the nurse or doctor immediately.

✳ Remember that everyone's experience is different, some patients are bed-ridden for days after treatment and some head straight off to work. Go easy on yourself and don't make comparisons.

✳ SYMPTOMS AND SIDE-EFFECTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY

- ▶ Fear ▶ Stress ▶ Anxiety ▶ Depression
- ▶ Pain - stomach or muscle pain, as well as headaches
- ▶ Gastrointestinal symptoms - nausea, vomiting, constipation, diarrhea
- ▶ Neuropathy - numbness, tingling, shooting pains, extreme temperature sensitivities
- ▶ Sleep Disruption
- ▶ Hair Loss - not for everyone
- ▶ Nose Bleeds & bleeding gums
- ▶ Tendency to bruise more easily
- ▶ Nerve damage can lead to - loss of balance, shakiness, problems with hearing and eyesight, and feeling clumsy
- ▶ Anemia - also includes heart palpitations, shortness of breath and pale complexion
- ▶ Sore Mouth - bad breathe, mouth ulcers, oral thrush, dry mouth
- ▶ Skin and nail changes - skin can become dry, patchy, discoloured, red and itchy, and sensitive to sunlight - nails can become brittle and break easily
- ▶ Chemo brain - brain fog, memory loss and lack of concentration
- ▶ Sex & fertility issues
- ▶ Loss of appetite - eating less will make it harder to recover during treatment
- ▶ Heart issues