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Understanding the Chemotherapy Process



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“Every year thousands of people are diagnosed with cancer. If you or a loved one are among them, you’re not alone. Medical research has yielded many methods for treating cancer. Depending on the type, your doctor may have recommended chemotherapy for you. Chemotherapy uses a drug or combination of drugs to fight cancer cells. Chemotherapy drugs are designed to interfere with the growth and spread of rapidly-dividing cells. The goal of chemotherapy is usually to improve the chance of survival.

Hello and welcome. If you’re about to undergo chemotherapy, this video’s for you. Some people find the thought of chemotherapy to be frightening, but during the next few moments we’ll show you what you can expect when you go for your first chemotherapy treatment. So let’s begin.

Chemotherapy is given in a very precise manner that requires your active involvement, so be sure to follow all your doctor’s instructions. Your doctor may prescribe certain medications for you to take before you arrive for your chemotherapy treatment, and may also have additional directions for you about eating and drinking. Some chemotherapy treatments require you to drink a lot of water before and after your treatment. This is very important, since you must stay hydrated. Some doctors allow patients to eat prior to treatment. Others don’t, because it may cause nausea.

The nurse will need to know the names of any other medications you’re taking, so it’s a good idea to write them down at home, and bring the list with you. The purpose is to prevent any unwanted drug interactions during your therapy. If your medications change during your months of treatment, you must tell your doctor and nurse immediately, since these changes may affect chemotherapy.

You may also need to bring someone to drive you to and from the infusion center, since the treatment may cause dizziness or nausea. Check with your doctor to see what he or she advises.

The amount of time you spend at the center will depend on your treatment program.

Treatments can range from a few minutes to a few hours, so ask your doctor about the length of time. Be sure to bring a book to read, or a tape or a CD player with earphones to help you pass the time.

The treatment will likely happen in a place like this, which may be located in a hospital or oncology center. It may even take place in your doctor's own office. Each place may do things a little differently. But the basic procedure will probably be something like this: You'll arrive at the center and check in with the receptionist. You may need to have a photo I.D. with you, as well as the name and phone number of the medical oncologist.

At the treatment center, you'll often hear the word infusion used interchangeably with chemotherapy. Infusion is the process by which most chemotherapy drugs are delivered into your system, and infusion works by simply inserting a small needle or IV into a vein, thereby allowing the drug to enter your bloodstream. Prior to your treatment, the doctor and nurse will see you for a physical examination to discuss any recent blood test results and the need for any premedications. You can use this time to ask your doctor or nurse any questions you may have. Aside from your doctor, your treatment team includes a chemotherapy nurse, pharmacist and other experienced professionals who work with many cancer patients each year. The staff is highly professional and makes sure that each patient is receiving the proper dose of the agents that have been prescribed. Once everything is ready, you'll be brought to a comfortable chair like this one for your treatment. Other patients in the center may be undergoing infusions in the same room with you. There may be a visitor's chair available, so a friend can keep you company during your treatment. If a family member or caregiver is sick, they should not come with you to the center, because patients being treated for cancer are more likely to catch colds, flu and other contagious diseases.

You may be given medication before or after your treatment to help prevent nausea. Be sure to ask your doctor or nurse if you have any questions. The chemotherapy medication may come in either an infusion bag like this one, or a bottle. The nurse will inject your hand or arm with a small needle from an angiocatheter, an IV, to set up the infusion line. At the same time this device will be used to draw blood for testing. If the nurse can't find a vein to draw blood, a portacath may be used. This is a surgically implanted device that allows easy access to a large vein underneath the skin of the chest. It has a different needle that may make it more comfortable than a traditional catheter. A portacath may

also be required for certain types of chemotherapy. This is something that you should discuss with your doctor and nurse.

The infusion procedure itself should not be painful, although you may feel some typical sensations like warmth, cold, or a slight dizziness when it begins. There are usually pillows for your head and arm so you're as comfortable as possible during the procedure. If you feel any extreme pain or discomfort, tell the nurse immediately. You'll find that the infusion center is a friendly and supportive place, where everyone is committed to helping you get through your cancer therapy with the best possible result. During your treatment the nurse will be nearby to monitor your blood pressure, pulse and temperature. Chemotherapy works by fighting the cancer cells in your body, but it may also attack some healthy cells. This means you can expect to experience some side effects. Chemotherapy fights rapidly growing cancer cells, and therefore can affect other rapidly growing cells as well, such as hair follicles. That's why some people lose their hair and body hair during chemotherapy treatments.

Chemotherapy affects your blood cells, so once you've had your first treatment, you will routinely have your blood tested to make sure your white blood cell count is high enough to safely tolerate the next infusion. White blood cells are important, because they help fight infection. Red blood cells counts are monitored as well. Low red blood counts can lead to anemia and tiredness. Chemotherapy may even be delayed or stopped if the blood levels are not where the doctor wants them. There are treatments available to increase blood cell counts. A small number of people develop severe fluid retention. Your doctor may want you to take another medication to prevent this from happening. This medication is usually taken prior to treatment, and it's important for you to follow the directions.

After your treatment, you may experience nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. Your medical team has treatments available to help you through many of the side effects. Be sure to discuss this with your doctor and nurse. And after the first few weeks, you may even lose the hair on your head, as well as eyebrows, eyelashes and body hair. These usually grow back once you've completed all your treatments.

Other side effects you may experience after treatment include fatigue, muscle pain, or a skin rash. And it's not uncommon to feel numbness, tingling, or burning sensations on your hands and feet due to chemotherapy. Different chemotherapies cause different side effects. Sometimes fingernails and toenails may change color as well, but there are medications to help with these changes. The important thing is to be aware of possible side effects, and to report them to your doctor or nurse so they can do their best to help you through them.

You should notify your doctor if you have a fever above 100.5 ° Fahrenheit, unusual bruising or bleeding, unusual dizziness, lightheadedness, shortness of

breath, and/or excessive fatigue, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or constipation lasting more than 48 hours after chemotherapy, mouth sores, ulceration, or painful swallowing.

Hopefully this video has given you a sense of what to expect from your first chemotherapy treatment. Remember, chemotherapy is designed to help you in your battle against cancer. Your entire chemotherapy team is on your side.”