

The Cancer Treatment Infusion Clinic: What to Know



Getting a cancer diagnosis is an emotional and challenging experience. As you face treatment, it's normal to feel concerned. But finding out more about the process can help ease your anxieties.

Treatments for cancer such as chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, and other medicines may be given at an infusion clinic. An infusion means a medicine is given into your vein.

What to do before you begin your infusion

Before starting treatment, you'll meet with your oncologist to discuss your treatment plan. Your provider will review which medicines you'll be getting, the dose, and the treatment schedule. They'll go over side effects and how to treat them. Make sure your provider addresses your questions and concerns.

Be sure to follow any pre-treatment instructions. Your oncology team will tell you when and if you should take your daily medicines. Ask them if you can eat beforehand. Depending on the medicine, treatment can be given over a few minutes or many hours. Most people find that a light meal or snack an hour before keeps their energy up.

Where to go for your infusion

Cancer treatment infusions are typically given at a hospital's outpatient infusion center. Other location options include the provider's office, your home, or in a hospital or clinic. This depends on the medicines, the doses, and your insurance coverage.

What to bring with you

Before you head out the door, make sure you're wearing comfortable clothes. Choose loose-fitting garments and dress in layers to stay comfortable.

Since infusion treatment can take hours, bring items to help pass the time and be as comfortable as possible, such as:

- A blanket or pillow for added comfort
- Snacks and water to stay nourished and hydrated
- Books, magazines, or a tablet
- A friend or family member for emotional support, if allowed

Take your ID and insurance information, too. Arrange to have someone drive you home, as you may also get medicines that make you sleepy. Or you may feel tired or unwell after your treatment.

Infusion prep

The infusion preparation process may vary depending on the location. But generally you can expect the following will be done.

When you arrive, a nurse will check your blood pressure, temperature, and heart rate. Your weight and height may be checked to help determine your medicine dose. You may have blood work drawn. You may meet with a healthcare provider so they can review your blood work results and do assessments to make sure you're able to get your treatment.

Once you are cleared to have treatment, you'll head to a treatment area. Here, you'll find a comfortable reclining chair or a bed to start the infusion process. At this time, some people may be given medicines to help manage possible side effects, such as:

- Nausea
- Allergic reactions
- Anxiety

Intravenous treatment

During an infusion, medicines are given by IV (intravenously) into a vein. This is done using a soft plastic tube called a catheter.

Common types of IVs are:

- **Peripheral.** An IV is placed in the hand or arm. This IV is often the best choice for short-term treatments because they can be used for only a few days. A nurse uses a needle to place the catheter into your vein. The needle is taken out and the catheter stays in place. The peripheral IV is removed at the end of your treatment session.
- **Central venous catheters (CVCs), also called central lines.** Most CVCs have a soft, flexible tube that ends in or near a large vein that goes into the heart. CVCs can stay in place for weeks or months if needed. You may get a CVC if:
 - Your treatment is expected to last at least a few months
 - The medicine you're getting is hard on the veins or if leaks into the tissue can cause damage
 - Your veins are hard to find
 - You need multiple IV sites to get several medicines or liquid nutrition

There are several types of CVCs. You and your healthcare provider will discuss which is best for you, when you will have it placed, and how to care for it. The kinds of CVCs often used during cancer treatment are:

- Implanted ports
- Tunneled catheters
- PICCs (peripherally inserted central catheters)

How IV medicines are given

- **IV push.** Some medicines may be put into your IV or CVC over several minutes with a syringe.
- **IV infusion.** An infusion may take minutes or hours. A bag containing the medicines is connected to your IV or CVC with a plastic tube. A pump controls the flow of the medicine.
- **Continuous infusion.** This type of infusion may last several days. You wear or carry a portable pump that controls the flow of the medicine. It is attached to your CVC. Your healthcare team can tell you more about how to care for the pump at home.

After the infusion

The treatment session can last anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. This will depend on your treatment plan.

Once it's complete, the nurse will remove the peripheral IV or disconnect the tubing from the central line. They may monitor you for a short time to ensure you don't have any immediate side effects.

Moving forward with treatment

Many cancer treatment medicines are given in cycles. Each cycle includes a treatment period followed by a rest period. This allows your body to recover. The duration of a cycle varies. But 2 to 4 weeks is common. The total number of cycles will depend on your cancer and treatment plan.

There's no doubt that cancer treatment is challenging. But remember that your care team is there to support you during your treatment journey. Be sure you know what side effects to watch for and when to report them to your healthcare team. Know how to contact the office after hours and on weekends or holidays. You can always reach out to them with any questions or concerns along the way.

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