

Staff Ed: Anticancer Medicines (Chemotherapy)



Anticancer medicines (also called chemotherapy medicines) can help save or prolong the lives of patients with cancer. However, they can pose a hazard to nurses and pharmacists who handle them or to housekeeping staff who clean up spills and remove waste. Follow the tips below, along with your employer's safety standards, and you'll help keep everyone safe.

Use PPE (personal protective equipment)

Wear PPE during the preparation and administration of medicines.

Work safely

Mix medicines in a safety cabinet. Other actions, such as removing needles from vials, removing air from syringes, and priming tubing and administration sets, should also be done in a safety cabinet.

Check labels

Clearly label all medicines and equipment and replace any torn labels. Ensure containers with hazardous medicines have a warning label noting the need for special handling and disposal.

Transport safely

Hand-carry or transport materials in a thick, leak-proof container.

Store properly

Chemotherapy medicines must be stored separately from nonhazardous medicines in a designated area. The area should be clearly marked along with indications for the need for special precautions.

Dispose of waste

All medicine waste should be placed in properly labeled, sealed bags and discarded in properly labeled waste bins.

Clean up spills

Clean up spills immediately. Use a spill kit and follow your facility's procedure for cleaning. Wear full protective clothing and a respirator.

Limit the access

The access to chemotherapy medicines must be restricted to staff who are well trained in their handling.

Immunocompromised individuals, pregnant women or those planning to conceive, and nursing mothers should avoid working with these medicines.

Risks of exposure

Medicines that kill cancer cells can affect normal cells, too. Some of the side effects from workplace exposure may include skin rash, hair loss, nausea, hearing loss, damage to the liver, heart, or kidneys, infertility, birth defects, and cancer.

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) publishes a list of hazardous medicines that is updated every two years. It can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2016-161/default.html>.

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