

Overview

Chemotherapy

- Overview
- [What happens](#)
- [Side effects](#)

Chemotherapy is a cancer treatment where medicine is used to kill cancer cells.

There are many different types of chemotherapy medicine, but they all work in a similar way.

They stop cancer cells reproducing. This stops them from growing and spreading in the body.

When chemotherapy is used

Chemotherapy may be used if cancer has spread or there's a risk it will.

Chemotherapy can:

- try to cure the cancer completely
- make other treatments more effective - for example, it can be combined with radiotherapy or used before surgery
- reduce the risk of the cancer coming back after radiotherapy or surgery
- relieve symptoms if a cure is not possible

How effective chemotherapy is varies a lot. Ask your doctors about the chances of treatment being successful for you.

Types of chemotherapy

Your doctors will recommend the best type of chemotherapy for you.

There are 2 common types of chemotherapy.

Intravenous chemotherapy

This is where chemotherapy is given into a vein. This is usually done in hospital. It involves medicine

being given through a tube in a vein in your hand, arm or chest.

Oral chemotherapy

This usually involves taking a course of tablets at home. You will have regular check-ups in hospital.

You may be treated with 1 type of chemotherapy medicine or a combination of different types.

You'll usually have several treatment sessions. They will usually be spread over the course of a few months.

Side effects of chemotherapy

As well as killing cancer cells, chemotherapy can damage some healthy cells in the body. These could be blood cells, skin cells and cells in the mouth, stomach and bowel.

This can cause a range of unpleasant side effects, such as:

- feeling tired most of the time
- feeling sick and vomiting
- hair loss
- an increased risk of picking up infections
- a sore mouth
- dry, sore or itchy skin
- [diarrhoea](#) or constipation

Many of these side effects can be treated or prevented. Most of them will pass after treatment stops.

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