

[Home](#) › [About cancer](#) › [Treatment for cancer](#) › [Cancer drugs A to Z list](#) › Paclitaxel

Paclitaxel

Paclitaxel is a type of chemotherapy. It is a treatment for a number of different cancer types.

You pronounce paclitaxel as pac-lih-tax-ul.

How does paclitaxel work?

Paclitaxel works by stopping cancer cells from separating into two new cells. This blocks the growth of the cancer.

How do you have paclitaxel?

You have paclitaxel as a drip into your bloodstream (intravenously).

You might have treatment through a long plastic tube that goes into a large vein in your chest. The tube stays in place throughout the course of treatment. This can be a:

- central line
- PICC line
- portacath

Find out more about central lines, PICCs and portacaths

When you have treatment

You have paclitaxel as cycles of treatment. This means that you have the drug and then have a rest to allow your body to recover.

You might have paclitaxel every 2 or 3 weeks. You might have it on its own or with other chemotherapy drugs.

Tests

You have blood tests before and during your treatment. They check your levels of blood cells and other substances in the blood. They also check how well your liver and kidneys are working.

What are the side effects of paclitaxel?

Side effects can vary from person to person. They also depend on what other treatments you're having.

When to contact your team

Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will go through the possible side effects. They will monitor you during treatment and check how you are at your appointments. Contact your advice line as soon as possible if:

- you have severe side effects
- your side effects aren't getting any better
- your side effects are getting worse

Early treatment can help manage side effects better.

Contact your advice line immediately if you have signs of infection, including a temperature above 37.5C or below 36C.

We haven't listed all the side effects here. Remember it is very unlikely that you will have all of these side effects. But you might have some of them at the same time.

Common side effects

These side effects happen in more than 10 in 100 people (more than 10%). You might have one or more of them. They include:

Risk of infection

Increased risk of getting an infection is due to a drop in white blood cells. Symptoms include a change in temperature, aching muscles, headaches, feeling cold and shivery and generally unwell. You might have other symptoms depending on where the infection is.

Infections can sometimes be life threatening. You should contact your advice line urgently if you think you have an infection.

Breathlessness and looking pale

You might be breathless and look pale due to a drop in red blood cells. This is called anaemia.

Bruising and bleeding

This is due to a drop in the number of platelets in your blood. These blood cells help the blood to clot when we cut ourselves. You may have nosebleeds or bleeding gums after brushing your teeth. Or you may have lots of tiny red spots or bruises on your arms or legs (known as petechiae).

Allergic reaction

You might have a mild allergic reaction during or shortly after your treatment. This could be a rash, itching or a red face.

You will usually be given medication just before treatment to prevent or reduce risk of an allergic reaction.

Numbness and tingling in hands and feet


Numbness or tingling in fingers or toes is often temporary and can improve after you finish treatment. Tell your healthcare team if you're finding it difficult to walk or complete fiddly tasks such as doing up buttons.

This can continue for a long time after treatment finishes, and may be permanent.

Low blood pressure (hypotension)

Tell your doctor or nurse if you feel lightheaded or dizzy. You have your blood pressure checked regularly.

Diarrhoea

Contact your advice line if you have diarrhoea. For example, in one day you have 2 or more loose bowel movements than usual. If you have a stoma , you might have more output than normal. Your doctor may give you anti diarrhoea medicine to take home with you after treatment.

Try to eat small meals and snacks regularly. It's best to try to have a healthy balanced diet if you can. You don't necessarily need to stop eating foods that contain fibre. But if your diet is normally very high in fibre, it might help to cut back on high fibre foods such as beans, nuts, seeds, dried fruit, bran and raw vegetables.

Drink plenty to try and replace the fluid lost. Aim for 8 to 10 glasses per day.

Feeling or being sick

Feeling or being sick is usually well controlled with anti sickness medicines. It might help to avoid fatty or fried foods, eat small meals and snacks and take regular sips of water. Relaxation techniques might also help.

It is important to take anti sickness medicines as prescribed even if you don't feel sick. It is easier to prevent sickness rather than treat it once it has started.

Sore mouth

Mouth sores and ulcers can be painful. It helps to keep your mouth and teeth clean, drink plenty of fluids and avoid acidic foods such as lemons. Chewing gum can help to keep your mouth moist. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have ulcers.

Hair loss

You could lose all your hair. This includes your eyelashes, eyebrows, underarms, legs and sometimes pubic hair. Your hair will usually grow back once treatment has finished but it is likely to be softer. It may grow back a different colour or be curlier than before.

Some people may have permanent hair loss although this is very rare.

Muscle and joint pain

You might feel some pain from your muscles and joints. Speak to your doctor or nurse about what painkillers you can take to help with this.

Urinary tract infections (UTIs)

Tell your doctor or nurse if you think you might have a urinary tract infection. You might find it difficult to pass urine, want to go with some urgency or are going more often. There may be pain or burning when you go. You may see blood in your urine, or your urine might smell bad or look cloudy.

Occasional side effects

These side effects happen in between 1 and 10 out of every 100 people (between 1 and 10%). You might have one or more of them. They include:

- slow heart rate
 - nail and skin changes - these are usually mild and return to normal after treatment is finished
 - pain, swelling, redness at the injection site
 - changes to the way the liver works - usually mild and doesn't cause symptoms
-

Rare side effects

These side effects happen in fewer than 1 in 100 people (fewer than 1%). You might have one or more of them. They include:

- sepsis – a life threatening reaction to infection - signs include blood pressure dropping dangerously low, confusion, diarrhoea, feeling or being sick and cold, clammy skin
- changes to the heart including heart attack and fast beating heart rate
- an allergic reaction needing treatment – signs include fainting, sweating, tiredness, swelling of the face, lips, mouth, tongue or throat
- inflammation of the blood vessels
- high blood pressure
- blood clots that can be life threatening; signs are pain, swelling and redness where the clot is - feeling breathless can be a sign of a blood clot on the lung
- changes to the lung tissue that can cause cough and breathlessness - rarely this can be life threatening
- pain in the chest, back, hands and feet
- feeling chills
- tummy pain
- dizziness

Contact your advice line or doctor straight away if you have any symptoms of these side effects.

Coping with side effects

We have more information about side effects and tips on how to cope with them.

[Read more about how to cope with side effects](#)

What else should I know?

Other medicines, food and drink

Cancer drugs can interact with medicines, herbal products, and some food and drinks. We are unable to list all the possible interactions that may happen. An example is grapefruit or grapefruit juice which can increase the side effects of certain drugs.

Tell your healthcare team about any medicines you are taking. This includes vitamins, herbal supplements and over the counter remedies. Also let them know about any other medical conditions or allergies you may have.

Loss of fertility

You may not be able to become pregnant or get someone pregnant after treatment with this drug. Talk to your doctor before starting treatment if you think you may want to have a baby in the future.

Men might be able to store sperm before starting treatment. And women might be able to store eggs or ovarian tissue. But these services are not available in every hospital, so you would need to ask your doctor about this.

Pregnancy and contraception

This treatment may harm a baby developing in the womb. It is important not to become pregnant or get someone pregnant while you're having treatment and for at least 6 months afterwards.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about effective contraception before starting treatment. Let them know straight away if you or your partner become pregnant while having treatment.

Treatment for other conditions

If you are having tests or treatment for anything else, always mention your cancer treatment. For example, if you are visiting your dentist.

Breastfeeding

Don't breastfeed during this treatment because the drug may come through into your breast milk.

Immunisation

Don't have immunisations with live vaccines while you're having treatment and for up to 12 months afterwards. The length of time depends on the treatment you are having. Ask your doctor or pharmacist how long you should avoid live vaccinations.

In the UK, live vaccines include rubella, mumps, measles, BCG, yellow fever and one of the shingles vaccines called Zostavax.

You can have:

- other vaccines, but they might not give you as much protection as usual
- the flu vaccine (as an injection)
- the coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine - talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the best time to have it in relation to your cancer treatment

Members of your household who are aged 5 years or over are also able to have the COVID-19 vaccine. This is to help lower your risk of getting COVID-19 while having cancer treatment and until your [immune system](#) recovers from treatment.

Find out more about the COVID-19 vaccine and cancer

Contact with others who have had immunisations - You can be in contact with other people who have had live vaccines as injections. Avoid close contact with people who have recently had live vaccines taken by mouth (oral vaccines) such as the oral typhoid vaccine. Sometimes people who have had the live shingles vaccine can get a shingles type rash. If this happens they should keep the area covered.

If your immune system is severely weakened, you should avoid contact with children who have had the flu vaccine as a nasal spray as this is a live vaccine. This is for 2 weeks following their vaccination.

Babies have the live rotavirus vaccine. The virus is in the baby's poo for about 2 weeks and could make you ill if your immunity is low. Get someone else to change their nappies during this time if you can. If this isn't possible, wash your hands well after changing their nappy.

More information about this treatment

For further information about this treatment and possible side effects go to the electronic Medicines Compendium (eMC) website. You can find the patient information leaflet on this website.

eMC website

You can report any side effect you have to the Medicines Health and Regulatory Authority (MHRA) as part of their Yellow Card Scheme.

Report a side effect to the MHRA

+ References

[Electronic medicines compendium](#)

Accessed July 2022



Immunisation against infectious disease: Chapter 6: General contraindications to vaccination

Public Health England

First published: March 2013 and regularly updated on the Gov.UK website

Taxane-induced pulmonary toxicity

Talmadge E King

UpToDate, Last updated January 2019

Last reviewed: 02 Dec 2022

 [Print page](#)

Next review due: 02 Dec 2025

Related links

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is a standard treatment for some types of cancer. It uses anti cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells.

Your cancer type

Search for the cancer type you want to find out about. Each section has detailed information about symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, research and coping with cancer.

Coping with cancer

Coping with cancer can be difficult. There is help and support available. Find out about the emotional, physical and practical effects of cancer and how to manage them.



It's a worrying time for many people and we want to be there for you whenever - and wherever - you need us. Cancer Chat is our fully moderated forum where you can talk to others affected by cancer, share experiences, and get support. Cancer Chat is free to join and available 24 hours a day.

Visit the Cancer Chat forum



About Cancer generously supported by [Dangoor Education](#) since 2010.



Find a clinical trial



Cancer Chat forum



**Nurse helpline
0808 800 4040**

Speak to a nurse

[Nurse Helpline](#)

[0808 800 4040](#)

Questions about cancer? Call freephone

9 to 5 Monday to Friday or [email us](#)

Quick links

[Find local shops](#)

[Shop online](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Jobs](#)

Follow us



[About our information](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Modern Slavery Statement](#)

[Cookies](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Sitemap](#)



Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666), the Isle of Man (1103) and Jersey (247). A company limited by guarantee. Registered company in England and Wales (4325234) and the Isle of Man (5713F). Registered address: 2 Redman Place, London, E20 1JQ.