

Side effects of cancer treatment

This information is about some of the side effects of cancer treatment.

Any words that are underlined are explained in the glossary at the end.

We hope this fact sheet answers your questions. If you have any more questions, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having your treatment.

If you have any questions or want someone to talk to, you can call Macmillan Cancer Support on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

We have more information in [language] about different types of cancer, treatments and living with cancer. Visit macmillan.org.uk/translations or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

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What are side effects?

Side effects are unwanted effects of cancer treatment. For example, hair loss, feeling sick or tiredness. Most side effects go away after treatment finishes.

Side effects can be mild and last for a short time. But sometimes they can affect you more.

The side effects you get will depend on your treatment. Treatments can affect each person differently. You may only have a few of the side effects mentioned here. Your doctors or nurses will tell you about any side effects you may have.

Treatments for cancer

There are different types of cancer treatment.

- Surgery – this means having an operation to remove the tumour and cancer cells.
- Chemotherapy – this uses drugs to destroy cancer cells.
- Radiotherapy – this uses strong x-rays to destroy cancer cells.

- Hormonal therapy – this changes hormones in your body, which can stop cancer from growing.
- Targeted therapy – this uses drugs that target the specific way that cancer cells grow.

Possible side effects

Risk of infection

Chemotherapy can reduce the number of white blood cells in your blood. This is called neutropenia. This makes you more likely to get an infection.

Contact the hospital straight away on the contact number you've been given if:

- your temperature goes over 37.5°C (99.5°F) or over 38°C (100.4°F), depending on the advice given by your chemotherapy team
- you suddenly feel unwell, even with a normal temperature
- you have symptoms of an infection, such as:
 - feeling hot or cold
 - feeling shaky
 - a sore throat
 - a cough
 - diarrhoea
 - needing to pass urine a lot.

Your white blood cells usually return to normal before your next treatment. You will have a blood test before having more chemotherapy. If your white blood cells are still low, your doctor may delay your treatment for a short time.

Radiotherapy can affect the white blood cells and increase the risk of infection in some people. But it depends on the dose you have and which part of your body is being treated. Your doctor or nurse will explain more.

Surgery can make you more likely to get an infection because it causes a break in the skin. The skin is part of the body's natural protection against bacteria outside the body. You may be more likely to get an infection at the wound site.

It's important to let your doctor know straight away if your wound becomes hot, swollen, painful, or if you feel unwell.

If your doctor thinks you have an infection, you may need antibiotics. You may have these as tablets or as an injection into a vein in your arm or hand.

Anaemia

Cancer treatments can reduce the number of red blood cells in your blood. These cells carry oxygen around the body. If the number is low, you may feel tired and breathless. Tell your doctor or nurse if you feel like this. You may need to be given extra red blood cells. This is called a blood transfusion

Bruising and bleeding

Cancer treatments can reduce the number of platelets in your blood. Platelets are cells that help the blood to clot. Tell your doctor if you have any bruising or bleeding. This includes nosebleeds, bleeding gums, blood spots or rashes on the skin. Some people may need to be given extra platelets.

Hair loss

Chemotherapy can make the hair on your head fall out or get thinner. Not all drugs make your hair fall out. Some drugs make only a little bit of hair fall out. Others can make all of your hair fall out.

If your hair falls out, it usually happens two to three weeks after starting treatment. Sometimes it can happen within a few days. You can ask about getting a wig or hairpiece.

It usually grows back over a few months, once you have finished treatment. At first your hair may be curlier or a different colour. But it usually returns to what it was like before treatment.

Radiotherapy can also cause hair loss. You will only lose hair from the area of your body having treatment. If you are having treatment to your head, you may lose some hair from your head. If you are having treatment to your breast, the hair under your arm might fall out.

Hormonal therapy may make your hair become thinner.

It can be very upsetting to lose your hair. But your hair will usually grow back after treatment. Your nurse can give you advice about coping with hair loss.

Tiredness

All cancer treatments can make you feel tired. This is often worse towards the end of treatment. It can last for some weeks after treatment finishes.

Try to get as much rest as you need. It helps to also do some gentle exercise such as short walks.

Sore mouth and ulcers

Some cancer treatments can make your mouth sore or dry. You may notice small ulcers. Try to:

- drink lots of fluids
- clean your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush
- avoid hot and spicy foods.

Tell your doctor or nurse if your mouth is sore. They will check for infection. They may give you mouthwashes or medicine to help.

Feeling sick or being sick

Cancer treatment can make you feel sick or be sick (vomit). Your doctor will give you medicine to prevent or control sickness.

If you still feel sick, tell your doctor or nurse. They can try other medicines that may work better for you.

Loss of appetite

Some people lose their appetite during cancer treatment. If this happens, try having regular small snacks rather than large meals. If you're having problems eating, it's important to tell the hospital staff. They will give you advice on improving your appetite and keeping to a healthy weight.

Taste changes

You may notice that food tastes different. Some people get a strange metal or bitter taste in their mouth. Sucking on flavoured sugar-free sweets or mints may help. Normal taste usually comes back after treatment finishes.

Constipation

Some cancer treatments can cause constipation. Other medicines can also cause constipation, like painkillers or anti-sickness drugs. Drinking lots of fluids, eating foods with lots of fibre, and doing some gentle exercise can help. If you still have constipation, you may need to take a medicine called a laxative. Your doctor can give this to you.

Diarrhoea

Some cancer treatments, and other medicines like antibiotics, can cause diarrhoea. It is important to drink plenty of fluids if this happens. Tell your doctor if you have diarrhoea. They can give you medicines to help.

Skin changes

Cancer treatments can affect your skin. Depending on your treatment, you may have some of the following skin problems. There are things you can do to look after your skin.

Dry or discoloured skin

- Try using an unperfumed moisturiser. Check with your doctor before using creams if you are having radiotherapy.
- Use an electric razor instead of wet shaving. This will reduce the risk of cuts.

Sensitivity to sunlight

- Protect yourself if you go out in the sun. Use a suncream with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30.
- Wear a hat or scarf on your head
- Wear loose clothes made of cotton or other natural fibres.

Red or sore skin

- Do not use soaps or creams that contain perfume.
- Only use deodorants, creams or soaps recommended by your doctor.

Rashes or itching

- Speak to your doctor or nurse. They can provide medicines or creams to help.
- Have lukewarm baths or showers rather than hot ones.
- Don't scratch the itchy area. Keep your nails clean and short.

Sore skin on the hands and feet

- If this happens, tell your doctor straight away. They may need to adjust your treatment.
- Ask your doctor about creams that might help.
- Keep your hands and feet cool.
- Avoid hot water.
- Don't wear tight socks, shoes or gloves.

Hormonal changes

Some cancer treatments can affect your hormones. If you are likely to have hormonal side effects, your doctors will tell you before your treatment. Hormonal side effects may be temporary or permanent.

Symptoms can include:

- hot flushes and sweats
- breast tenderness (in men)
- weight gain
- bone thinning
- lowered sex drive

- impotence (in men)
- changes to menstruation (in women)
- vaginal dryness (in women).

What you can do

- For your clothes and bed linen, use several thin layers. This means you can take them off and put them on as needed if you have hot flushes.
- Have lukewarm or cool baths and showers instead of hot ones.
- Some complementary therapies can help reduce symptoms, but check with your doctor before taking these.
- For men, there are medicines and devices that can help deal with impotence.
- For women, there may be medicines that can help with some symptoms. Talk to your doctor about this.
- Try to be physically active, for example walking. It can help to keep your bones strong.

It is important to mention any side effect you have to your doctor or nurse. They can give you advice. There are often things that can help.

How Macmillan can help

Macmillan is here to help you and your family. You can get support from:

- **The Macmillan Support Line (0808 808 00 00).** We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use. We can answer medical questions, give you information about financial support, or talk to you about your feelings. The phone line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.
- **The Macmillan website (macmillan.org.uk).** Our site has lots of English information about cancer and living with cancer. There is more information in other languages at macmillan.org.uk/translations
- **Information centres.** At an information centre, you can talk to a cancer support specialist and get written information. Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us. Your hospital might have a centre.
- **Local support groups** – Find a group near you at macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups or call us.
- **Macmillan Online Community** – You can talk to other people in similar situations at macmillan.org.uk/community

Glossary

Antibiotics – Medicine that treats an infection.

Complementary therapies – Treatments or activities that can help you feel better, like herbal treatments or massage. They do not treat cancer.

Constipation – When you find it difficult or painful to poo. You might not be going as often as usual, or your poo might be hard and lumpy.

Diarrhoea – When you have soft or watery poo. You might need the toilet more than usual or very urgently. You may also have tummy pain.

Immune system – The parts of the body that fight against infections.

Impotence – Not being able to have an erection.

Menstruation – The normal discharge of blood from the womb that comes out of the vagina once a month.

Neutropenia – When you do not have enough white blood cells. This makes you more likely to get an infection.

White blood cells – Cells in our blood that fight infection. They are part of the immune system.

Wound site – The cut in the skin where an operation was done.

More information in [language]

We have information in [language] about these topics:

Types of cancer	Coping with cancer
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breast cancer• Large bowel cancer• Lung cancer• Prostate cancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you're diagnosed with cancer – A quick guide• Claiming benefits• Eating problems and cancer• End of life• Healthy eating• Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer• Side effects of cancer treatment• What you can do to help yourself
Treatments <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chemotherapy• Radiotherapy• Surgery	

To see this information, go to macmillan.org.uk/translations

Speak to us in [language]

You can call Macmillan free on **0808 808 00 00** and speak to us in your own language through an interpreter. You can talk to us about your worries and medical questions. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm.

References and thanks

All of this information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team.

The information in this fact sheet is based on the Macmillan booklet **Side effects of cancer treatment**. We can send you a copy, but the full booklet is only available in English.

This content has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Macmillan Consultant Medical Oncologist. With thanks to Sarah Grantham, Lymphoma CNS and Nicola Jackson, Macmillan Lung Cancer CNS. Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk**

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