



## Side effects of cancer treatment: English

This information is about the side effects of cancer treatment.

If you have any questions about this information, ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital where you are having treatment.

You can also call Macmillan Cancer Support on freephone **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your own language. When you call us, please tell us in English which language you need.

There is more cancer information in this language on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://macmillan.org.uk/translations)

This information is about:

- [What are side effects?](#)
- [Possible side effects](#)
- [Getting the right care and support for you](#)
- [How Macmillan can help you](#)
- [More information in your language](#)
- [References and thanks](#)

## 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. But some side effects last a long time or never go away. Some side effects start months or years after treatment ends.

The side effects you get will depend on your treatment and can affect each person differently. You may only have a few of the side effects mentioned. Your cancer team will give you more information about side effects you have.

## Treatments for cancer

There are different types of cancer treatment:

- Surgery (an operation) to remove a tumour and nearby tissues that may contain cancer cells.
- Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer drugs to destroy cancer cells.
- Radiotherapy uses high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells.
- Hormonal therapy changes the way hormones are produced or affects how they work in the body.
- Targeted therapy uses drugs to target something in or around the cancer cell that is helping it grow and survive.
- Immunotherapy uses the immune system to find and attack cancer cells.

## Possible side effects

### Low number of blood cells

Cancer treatment can affect your bone marrow, where blood cells are made. This can cause you to have low numbers of blood cells. It mostly happens with chemotherapy. But some targeted therapy and immunotherapy drugs can cause low blood cells too. It only happens with radiotherapy if a large area is being treated.

### Low white blood cell count (neutropenia)

A low white blood cell count is called neutropenia. If the number of white blood cells is low, you are more likely to get an infection.

It is important to get any infection treated as soon as possible. If you have any of the following symptoms, contact hospital straight away on the 24-hour number:

- a temperature above 37.5°C
- a temperature below 36°C
- you feel unwell, even with a normal temperature
- you have symptoms of an infection.

Symptoms of an infection include:

- feeling shivery and shaking
- a sore throat
- a cough
- breathlessness
- diarrhoea
- needing to pass urine (pee) often, or discomfort when you pass urine.

It is important to follow any specific advice your cancer team give you.

Your cancer doctor or nurse will tell you when your white blood cell levels are most likely to be low. It is important to take extra care to prevent infection at these times.

### **Low red blood cell count (anaemia)**

Cancer treatment can reduce the number of red blood cells in your blood. Red blood cells carry oxygen around the body. If the number of red blood cells is low, this is called anaemia. You may feel:

- very low in energy
- breathless
- dizzy and light-headed.

Tell your cancer team if you feel like this. If you are very anaemic, you may need a drip to give you extra red blood cells. This is called a blood transfusion.

### **Low platelet count**

Cancer treatment can reduce the number of platelets in your blood. Platelets are cells that help the blood to clot.

If your platelets are low, you may bruise or bleed easily. You may have:

- nosebleeds
- bleeding gums
- heavy periods
- blood in your urine (pee) or stools (poo)
- tiny red or purple spots on your skin that may look like a rash.

Tell your cancer team if you have any unexplained bruising or bleeding. Some people may need a drip to give them extra platelets. This is called a platelet transfusion.

### **Hair loss and changes to hair**

Some cancer treatments, such as some chemotherapy, can sometimes cause hair loss. Hair loss is usually temporary. Your cancer team will tell you if you are likely to lose your hair.

You may not lose all your hair, but the condition and texture of your hair may change. The level of hair loss can vary. This depends on:

- the drug or combination of drugs you are having
- the dose of each drug
- how your body reacts.

### **Fatigue (tiredness)**

Many cancer treatments can cause fatigue. For most people, fatigue gets better after treatment finishes. But for some it may continue.

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

Fatigue can have a big impact on your everyday life and how you feel overall. Talk to your cancer team, as there are things they can do to help. For example, they may be able to treat some of the causes of fatigue such as anaemia.

We have more information in your language about tiredness (fatigue) on our website, visit [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/translations)

### **Sore mouth and ulcers**

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

- try to drink plenty of fluids
- keep your food moist by adding sauces or gravy
- clean your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush
- follow a good mouth care routine.

Tell your cancer team if your mouth is sore. They may:

- check for infection
- give you mouthwashes
- prescribe medicine or suggest taking painkillers
- prescribe a gel that can protect the lining of your mouth.

### **Feeling sick or being sick**

Some cancer treatments can cause you to feel sick (nausea) or be sick (vomit). Your cancer team may prescribe anti-sickness drugs if you need them.

Tell your cancer team if the drugs are not helping. They can prescribe a different type.

Anti-sickness drugs work better when you take them regularly. Some anti-sickness drugs can make you constipated.

## **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 are having problems eating, it is important to tell your cancer team. 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. Your taste usually returns to normal after treatment finishes.

## **Constipation**

Some cancer treatments can cause constipation. Constipation means that you are not able to pass stools (poo) as often as you normally do. Your poo can become harder and it can become difficult or painful to pass.

Other medicines can also cause constipation, like painkillers or anti-sickness drugs. To help this, you could try drinking lots of fluids, eating foods with lots of fibre, and doing some gentle exercise. If you still have constipation, you may need to take a medicine called a laxative.

## **Diarrhoea**

Diarrhoea means passing more stools (poo) than is usual for you, or having watery or loose stools. If you have a stoma, it may be more active than usual.

Many cancer treatments and medications, such as antibiotics, can cause diarrhoea. It can also be caused by an infection.

Diarrhoea may be a temporary, mild problem. But for some people, it can be severe and cause dehydration. They can become very unwell and need to see a doctor or contact the hospital to help manage it. It is important to tell your cancer team if you have diarrhoea, if it is getting worse, or anti-diarrhoea treatment is not helping. It is also important to follow any advice your cancer team have given you.

## **Skin changes**

Some cancer treatments can affect your skin. Your cancer team will tell you about any changes that might happen due to cancer treatment.

Your cancer team may give you advice about looking after your skin. Tell them about any skin changes. It is very important to follow their advice. There may be some products you need to use or need to avoid.

If your skin is dry or itchy, use a moisturiser at least 2 times a day on your face and body. You may need a richer moisturiser than you usually use.

If your skin is very itchy, protect your skin from scratches by keeping your nails clean and short. Instead of scratching, try to rub or pat itchy areas.

If you are out in the sun, use suncream with a high sun protection factor on exposed areas (at least SPF 30). Protect your skin by staying out of the sun at the hottest time of the day.

### **Nail changes**

Some treatments may make your nails grow more slowly or break more easily. You might notice ridges on your nails or white or dark lines across them. Sometimes nails can become loose or fall out.

Tell your doctor or nurse about any changes to your nails. Your nails should go back to normal after cancer treatment finishes.

### **Sore hands and feet**

Some cancer drug treatments can make the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet sore. The skin may become red if you have white skin. It may become darker if you have black or brown skin.

You may also have pain or tingling in your palms or soles. This is called palmar-plantar or hand-foot syndrome. Tell your cancer team if this happens. To help with sore hands and feet, you can:

- keep your hands and feet cool
- moisturise regularly
- wear gloves when working in the house or garden
- avoid tight-fitting socks, shoes and gloves.

### **Hormonal changes**

Hormones control many different processes in the body. Some hormonal therapy treatments can change the levels of the sex hormones oestrogen and testosterone. Side effects of hormonal therapy can be temporary or permanent.

They can include:

- hot flushes and sweats
- mood changes
- lowered sex drive
- erection problems
- vaginal dryness
- tiredness.

Immunotherapy can affect how your body makes hormones. You may have regular blood tests to check hormone levels and treatment to manage them. If you are having immunotherapy, your cancer team will advise you what to look out for.

Sometimes side effects of immunotherapy can start after you finish treatment. If you notice hormonal side effects during or after treatment with immunotherapy, tell your doctor or nurse straight away. They can advise and treat you.

If you are having hot flushes and sweats:

- choose natural fabrics for your clothes and bedding, such as cotton.
- Wear layers so you can remove clothes as needed.
- Keep the room cool, or use a fan.
- Have lukewarm showers and baths, rather than hot ones.
- Cold drinks may help, but you should avoid alcohol and caffeine.

If you notice changes in your mood or sex drive, talk to your cancer team. They can offer you treatments and support, or refer you to a counsellor.

Talk to your cancer team about the treatments and support available for side effects such as erection problems and vaginal dryness.

## **Getting the right care and support for you**

If you have cancer and do not speak English, you may be worried that this will affect your cancer treatment and care. But your healthcare team should offer you care, support and information that meets your needs.

We know that sometimes people may have extra challenges in getting the right support. For example, if you work or have a family you might also have worries about money and transport costs. All of this can be stressful and hard to cope with.

## **How Macmillan can help you**

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are here to support you.

### **Macmillan Support Line**

We have interpreters, so you can speak to us in your language. Just tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

Our expert advisers on the Macmillan Support Line can help with medical questions or be there to listen if you need someone to talk to. We can also talk to you about your money worries and recommend other useful organisations that can help. The free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

## **Macmillan website**

Our website has lots of information in English about cancer. There is also more information in other languages at [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://macmillan.org.uk/translations)

We may also be able to arrange translations just for you. Email [informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk) to tell us what you need.

## **Information centres**

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. Find your nearest centre at [macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

## **Local support groups**

At a support group, you can talk to other people affected by cancer. Find out about support groups in your area at [macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups](https://macmillan.org.uk/supportgroups) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

## **Macmillan Online Community**

You can also talk to other people affected by cancer online at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://macmillan.org.uk/community)

You can access it at any time of day or night. You can share your experiences, ask questions, or just read people's posts.

## **More information in your language**

We have information in your language about these topics:

### **Signs and symptoms of cancer**

- Signs and symptoms cards

### **If you are diagnosed with cancer**

- Cancer care in the UK
- Healthcare for refugees and people seeking asylum
- If you are diagnosed with cancer

### **Types of cancer**

- Bowel cancer
- Breast cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Lung cancer
- Prostate cancer



## **Treatment for cancer**

- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy
- Sepsis and cancer
- Side effects of cancer treatment
- Surgery

## **Living with cancer**

- Claiming benefits when you have cancer
- Eating problems and cancer
- Healthy eating
- Help with costs when you have cancer
- LGBTQ+ people and cancer
- Tiredness (fatigue) and cancer

## **End of life**

- End of life

To see this information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/translations](https://macmillan.org.uk/translations)

For more support to understand information, go to [macmillan.org.uk/understandinginformation](https://macmillan.org.uk/understandinginformation)

## **References and thanks**

This information has been written and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been translated into this language by a translation company.

The information included is based on our side effects of cancer content available in English on our website.

This information has been reviewed by relevant experts and approved by members of Macmillan's Centre of Clinical Expertise.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this information.

All our information is based on the best evidence available. For more information about the sources we use, email [informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:informationproductionteam@macmillan.org.uk)

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