Infusional 5-Fluorouracil (5FU) Chemotherapy

A Guide for Patients

This leaflet has been designed to help you and your family understand more about the chemotherapy that you are about to have as treatment for your cancer. If you need more information or have further questions, please do not hesitate to ask your hospital doctor or chemotherapy nurse.

What is cancer?
Our bodies are made up of tiny structures called cells that cannot be seen by the naked eye. Normally these cells reproduce themselves by dividing in a regular fashion. This allows growth and repair of body tissues. Sometimes uncontrolled growth of cells occurs. This is what happens in cancer.

What is Chemotherapy?
Chemotherapy means treatment with medicines called cytotoxic drugs that are given to get rid of or control cancer cells.

How do chemotherapy drugs work?
The drugs enter the bloodstream and go to all parts of your body. They destroy the cancer cells by interfering with their ability to grow and divide. The drugs can also affect normal cells that are growing and dividing. This may cause side effects but these are usually temporary because healthy cells can grow back to normal.

How are chemotherapy drugs given?
The drugs are given through a skin-tunnelled catheter, known as a Hickman line or PICC line that is inserted into a large vein under local anaesthetic. Your Hickman/PICC line will have been inserted several days before you start your chemotherapy and will stay in until you finish your treatment. You will be given specific information about your Hickman line and your nurse will discuss this with you in more detail.

What can I do while having this treatment?
You can usually get on with life as normal. As long as you feel well enough you can carry on working and doing your favourite activities and hobbies. You cannot swim while your Hickman/PICC line is in. If it fits in around your treatments you can go on holiday in the UK, but please discuss any plans with your doctor or nurse before booking a holiday.

You can eat and drink as normal and you can drink alcohol in moderation. You may find that the taste of food and drinks may change. This will go back to normal once your treatment is finished.

You will be asked to have blood tests taken before each visit to let us check that we are able to give you your chemotherapy. The practice nurse at your GP surgery can do this the day before treatment. Your nurse will discuss this with you at your first chemotherapy visit.
What is Infusional 5FU?

This is the name of the chemotherapy that you are about to receive.

- 5FU is for 5-Fluorouracil, which is given (infused) by a small pump continuously through your line. You will return to see your nurse every week to have your pump changed.

This is 1 cycle of treatment.

The number of chemotherapy cycles depends on your treatment plan. Your nurse and doctor will discuss this with you. Arrangements for review of any side effects during the first cycle (telephone call or clinic visit) will be made when you come for your first treatment.

Will I have any side effects?

With most types of chemotherapy it is likely that you will have at least some side effects, although this varies considerably from patient to patient. Please tell your chemotherapy nurse at your next visit about any side effects that you have had. We will try to reduce them.

Below are some of the side effects that you may have:

**Diarrhoea (loose or watery bowel movements)**

This chemotherapy often causes diarrhoea, but it is usually mild and controlled by the anti-diarrhoea medicine (loperamide) we will give you. However, if you open your bowels 4 or more times a day more than usual, or have abdominal cramping, or diarrhoea at night, take loperamide, drink plenty of fluids and contact the hospital. You may need admitted for intravenous fluids.

**Sore mouth**

Mouth ulcers can occur inside and outside the mouth (lips). We advise that you keep your mouth clean using a new, soft toothbrush. Your nurse will give you advice about mouthwashes that you can use if needed. Contact your G.P. for advice if your mouth becomes sore or ulcerated as you can be given treatment for this. If you have ulcers that stop you eating or drinking, please contact the hospital.

**Soreness and Redness of Hands and Feet**

This is a temporary side effect and improves once the treatment is finished. We advise that you use a moisturising cream. Tell your nurse if you have it. If you find that your hands or feet become sore and interfere with your normal daily activities, contact the hospital.

**Skin changes.**

Sometimes your skin can become itchy and/or a rash may develop. Contact your G.P. for advice if needed and tell your nurse at your next visit.
Nausea (feeling sick) and Vomiting
Some patients can have nausea and vomiting. There are very effective medicines for nausea/vomiting that we will give you in case you need them. It is important to drink lots of fluids after chemotherapy so if the sickness or nausea is not controlled or is reducing the amount you can drink, please contact your G.P. Please tell your nurse on your next visit if you have had problems with nausea or vomiting so that we can give you different anti-sickness medicines.

Increased risk of infection
Following chemotherapy, your white blood cells can become low at any time after treatment. **If your temperature goes above 38°C (100.5°F) or if you suddenly feel unwell, even with a normal temperature contact your G.P. or NHS 24 straight away.** If you develop pain or discomfort around your Hickman/PICC line or if the skin around it appears red contact your G.P. or NHS 24.

Temporary hair thinning
You may notice an increased amount of hair in your hairbrush at times after treatment. It is unlikely that this will be enough to need a wig. However, if you feel that you need a wig at any time please speak with your nurse.

Chest Pain (Angina)
Very occasionally 5-Fluorouracil chemotherapy can cause chest pain. If you develop pain or tightness in your chest that may also spread to your neck, jaw or arm and you also feel sick or sweaty, call your GP or 999 immediately. Please tell the doctor that you are on 5FU chemotherapy and ask them to contact the oncology registrar for advice. If your pump is still running, the 5-Fluorouracil infusion should be stopped and disconnected. Don't restart your chemotherapy until review by/ discussion with the oncology team.

Fatigue
It is very common for people on chemotherapy with cancer to feel excessively tired at times or even exhausted, all or most of the time. This tiredness (or fatigue) is not relieved by rest or sleep and may get worse as you go through treatment. There are things that can be done to make things better so if you feel more tired than usual, please talk to your doctor or nurse. They can give you advice about coping with it.

Fertility
The drugs used in this chemotherapy regimen can affect your fertility. Women may find that their periods become irregular and may have an early menopause. If you wish to plan a family you should discuss this further with your consultant before starting your chemotherapy.

It is possible to have a normal sex life during treatment, however some people may find that their interest decreases. **It is very important that you use barrier contraception to avoid pregnancy.** Please refer to the specific patient information leaflet about this.
Interactions with other medicines
Please tell you doctor if you are taking Folic acid (a vitamin that can be in multivitamin tablets) as it can interact with your chemotherapy.

We hope that this information has helped you understand more about your chemotherapy. This leaflet is to be used along with discussion with your doctor and nurse. It is not intended to be the only information on this topic that you are given.

Contact Numbers:

For symptom advice:  Ward 1 (Mon-Fri 8.30 am –6pm)
0131 537____

For queries about appointments, booking transport, or phoning in your weight:
Ward 1 (Mon-Fri, 8.30 am –6pm)
0131 537 1878

Out of Hours Emergency Advice:
Phone NHS 24 on 08454 242424. Remember to tell them you are receiving chemotherapy.

If your GP needs further advice, the oncology registrar on call can be contacted by phoning the Western General Hospital switchboard on 0131 537 1000.

Other phone numbers specific to your care:

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