

How Does Chemotherapy Work?

Chemo destroys fast-growing cancer cells through drug therapy. Sometimes, it is the only cancer treatment needed; other times, it is used in combination with surgery or radiation therapy.

The way chemotherapy is given depends on the drugs used. Most often, chemo is injected into a vein through an IV (also called intravenous or IV therapy). IV therapy can be given in two ways:

- **A needle stick through a small vein in your hand or lower arm.** The drugs are pushed slowly into the vein or given via IV solution. Once the needle is in place, you should not feel anything.
- **Through a catheter.** A thin, flexible tube is inserted into a large central vein. This device, called a central venous catheter, reduces the need for multiple needle sticks when receiving treatment. It can be used for as long as chemo is needed and allows for chemo to be given at home, in an outpatient infusion center or at the hospital.

Other options for chemo treatment include oral delivery, in the form of a pill or liquid, or injected into your muscle or fatty tissue.

The length of your chemo treatment will depend on your cancer type, which drugs are used and how you respond to the treatment. It may last a few weeks, several months, or up to a year.

Chemotherapy Side Effects

While chemotherapy drugs target fast-growing cancer cells, they also affect normal, healthy cells and can lead to side effects. Side effects depend on your type of cancer and dose of chemo and can include:

- Fatigue
- Hair loss
- Nausea
- Pain
- Vomiting

Each person reacts differently to chemo, and some patients have few or no side effects. The doctors and staff will explain the potential side effects of your treatment and how to lessen them with medication or lifestyle changes.