



Coping with the Side Effects of Chemotherapy & Radiation Therapy: Fever, Nausea, Vomiting

CANCER SOCIETY - BRIEF FACTS

If you have cancer or are undergoing cancer treatment, it's possible you may not feel well. Both the disease and treatment (including surgery, chemotherapy and radiation) can cause a variety of "symptoms", including fatigue, nausea, vomiting, fever and infections. While some of these side effects are simply unpleasant, others can pose significant risks to your health and healing process.

For this reason, if you are experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, there are some general guidelines you should keep in mind. The best course of action for anyone with cancer is to learn about side effects before they occur, so that you know what to do if and when they happen.

- **If You are Undergoing Chemotherapy or Radiation Therapy, Watch for Fever & Infection**

Chemotherapy and radiation therapy are both very powerful treatments, and can produce strong side effects. One of the most dangerous of these side effects is infection.

While some side effects are simply unpleasant, others can pose a significant risk to your health.

Common signs of infection are swelling, redness, pain or fever, especially sustained fever. High fever can, in and of itself, be dangerous. **Take immediate action.** Contact your community oncology nurse or your Cancer Centre.

It is important to remember that the risks of infection and fever do not go away as soon as treatment ends. The amount of time a patient is at risk for infection varies greatly. It is important for you to ask your doctor or health care team about this.

Why Does Fever Occur?

Both chemotherapy and radiation therapy can greatly reduce the number of white blood cells in your body. These white blood cells are the body's natural "defence" against infection. Having a low "white cell count" as a result of treatment can leave a person at high risk for infection.

A fever can be a sign that your body has an infection. In addition, fevers are not good for your body - they can be exhausting and cause chills, headaches and other problems. Hence, it is very important to reduce fever

(and the infection that is causing it) as soon as possible, to monitor progress, and to report regularly to your doctor or health care team.

The most common course of action will be to investigate the cause of infection and to treat it appropriately. As with any serious side effect, the key to dealing with fever and infection is to watch for warning signs, contact your doctor, and take action quickly.

- **Be Careful Not to Believe These "Myths" About Fever**

1. **"Fever comes and goes - it's best just to let them run their course".** FALSE. Fevers are always an indication that something is wrong, and should be treated and reported. If they get too high, they can lead to dehydration and seizures. When one is undergoing chemotherapy or radiation therapy, fevers often indicate infection, which is serious and requires medical attention.
2. **"Fever helps burn up whatever is wrong."** FALSE. High fevers do not destroy bacteria that cause infection. This is why your doctor or health care team will treat both the fever and the possible infection - if your white blood cell count is low, your body will not be able to fight off the infection on its own.

REMEMBER: Watch for warning signs of infection, especially fever. If fever develops, don't wait to see "what happens", communicate with your cancer doctor or cancer health care team and follow the advice given.

Nausea & Vomiting

- **Nausea and Vomiting can accompany Chemotherapy, Radiation Therapy or Other Forms of Treatment and Medicine**

Many people are aware that nausea and vomiting are common side effects of chemotherapy. With radiation therapy nausea and vomiting may occur depending on the site of the treatment. Depending on your type of treatment, you may experience them together, separately, at different times throughout your illness, or not at all.

However, there is good news - in the last few years there have been many advances in controlling nausea and vomiting.



There are also things you can do to help limit nausea. Below is a list we hope will be helpful to you:

1. **Follow instructions for anti-nausea medicine.** If nausea persists contact the Wellington Cancer Centre or the community cancer nurse. Remember to keep all medications out of the reach of children. Check with your doctor or nurse whether you can drive while on this medication.
2. **Get plenty of rest.** Some patients report that resting can help them get over feelings of nausea. Also, some anti-nausea drugs are designed to make you sleepy and rest through a period of nausea.
3. **Relax and try to distract yourself.** Watching TV, listening to the radio or any other activity that relaxes you will help you feel less affected by symptoms.
4. **Wear loose-fitting clothes.** Tight sweaters, shirts or dresses, especially around the waist or neck, can add to feelings of stomach upset.
5. **Rinse your mouth often and avoid strong food or odours.** Rinsing can help eliminate a "bad taste" in your mouth, and you should not eat strong or spicy foods if you think you may experience nausea.
6. **See the Cancer Society booklet "Eating Well"** for further hints on managing nausea and the Cancer Society's **BRIEF FACT sheet "Practical Tips for People with Cancer who are Experiencing Nausea or Have Lost Their Appetite"**.

If you have been sick:

- **Try taking small sips of fluids or sucking on ice cubes an hour or so after being sick.** This can help settle your stomach.
- **Crackers or toast can help.** Because they are mild, these types of foods can put something back into your stomach, usually without upset.
- **Have another person stay with you.** Talking and getting encouragement from someone else can be a great help in feeling better.

The Cancer Society of New Zealand is a non-profit organisation whose mission is "to minimise the impact of cancer on our community". The Cancer Society's Support & Information Service assists people with cancer and family members through one-to-one counselling, support, educational programmes, such as LIVING WITH CANCER and CANSUPPORT, telephone contact, guidance, information and referrals to appropriate services. The Cancer Society also offers assistance with transport to treatment for those who require it, CANTALK newsletter and a specialist library and information service. There is a specialist nurse for patient information who can guide you - email: info@cancersoc.org.nz

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Web Site www.cancersoc.org.nz

- Kapiti Branch Phone 04-298-8914

- Nelson Centre Phone 03-546-3920

- Marlborough Centre Phone 03-579-4379

- Wairarapa Centre Phone 06-378-8039

Be Careful Not to Believe these "Myths" about Nausea and Vomiting

1. **"All radiation and chemotherapy treatments make you feel sick."** FALSE. Each person reacts differently to cancer therapy. Some people experience nausea, some do not. Symptoms can come and go throughout treatment.
2. **"There are no medications to get rid of nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy and radiation therapy. The ones that are available cause side effects."** FALSE. Medicines are available to help, and many have few side effects. These medicines are called "antiemetics". Ask your doctor.
3. **"Getting sick means the cancer treatment is working."** FALSE. Whether the treatment makes you sick or nauseous has no bearing on its effectiveness. Again, each person reacts differently to treatment. Some do not get ill at all.

REMEMBER: Nausea and vomiting can be an indication of a serious problem, especially if they interfere with your ability to take oral medication or cause bleeding or pain. Nausea and vomiting may be due to causes other than chemotherapy or radiation therapy and should be investigated by your doctor or nurse.



Wellington Division of the Cancer Society Support & Information

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