

# Side Effects

## Managing Your Side Effects

Cancer treatments try to destroy the cancer cells in your body. Unfortunately for some treatments, it is hard to destroy the cancer cells without damaging some healthy cells. Damage to healthy cells can cause side effects. The side effects you may have depend on:

- The type of treatment you receive or combination of treatments
- How the treatment is given (e.g. by mouth or vein)
- The amount of treatment you are given
- Your overall health
- Other medications that you may be taking

It is important to remember that cancer treatment will affect everyone differently. A certain treatment can make one person feel sick, while someone else may receive the same treatment and feel nothing at all. Your health care team will explain which side effects you are most likely to have and will suggest ways to manage them.

## Help Us Understand Your Symptoms

Managing your symptoms can improve your quality of life and well-being. One way to help you and your health care team learn if any side effects are of concern is by tracking changes over time. Changes to your care plan may be needed to help with these symptoms and help make you feel better.

To see how your symptoms are changing over time, you will be asked to rate ten symptoms on a scale of 1–10 as part of each appointment. You will also be asked to rate how the disease is impacting your daily life. You can choose to rate your symptoms at a touch screen computer called a kiosk, on an iPad supplied by the hospital, or on your own device by visiting <https://isaac.cancercare.on.ca/>.

A volunteer is there to help you log into the system. Do your best to answer the questions. You may ask for clarification with your health care provider during your appointment.

### Important Points to Remember

- You may not have any side effects. Everyone is different.
- In most cases, you will be able to manage the side effects on your own.
- Side effects usually go away after you finish your treatment.
- Keep track of any side effects that you may have in a diary, on a calendar, or in a notebook.

## Side Effects

Your health care team is there to help. Tell them about any side effects that you are experiencing. There are resources available for most side effects that your health care team can give to you and explain during your visit. These resources will tell you how to manage the symptoms and when to call for help. Common side effects related to each treatment can be found on the next few pages.

### What do I do if I am experiencing side effects?

If you are calling about symptoms, you should call **519-685-8600**.

Press '1' for patient and follow the prompts to reach the Triage Nursing Line. These lines are very busy. Please stay on the line until your call is answered.

The Clinic Services and Triage Nursing Line phones are answered Monday to Friday from **8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.** The office is closed from **12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.** daily.

If it is after hours, a weekend, or a holiday, call CAREChart@home after-hours nursing line at **1-877-681-3057**, your family doctor, Telehealth Ontario, or go to the nearest Emergency Department.

## Chemotherapy – Common Side Effects

Chemotherapy drugs kill cancer cells, but they can also damage healthy cells. Side effects are due to damage to healthy cells. Different cells and tissues in the body react differently with chemotherapy. Chemotherapy medications affect cells that rapidly grow and divide, such as blood cells in the bone marrow, hair follicle cells, and cells lining the mouth and gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

### Some common side effects include:

- Low blood cell counts
  - Low white blood cells
  - Low red blood cells
  - Low platelets
- Inflamed mucous membranes
  - Esophagus
  - Rectum
  - Vagina
- Fatigue
- Sore mouth
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Changes in taste and smell
- Loss of appetite
- Skin changes

- Hair loss
- Eye changes
- Diarrhea
- Pain
- Constipation
- Sexuality and fertility problems
- Inflamed vein
- Hearing problems
- Thinking and memory changes (“chemo brain”)
- Numbness, burning or tingling in hands and feet

## Immunotherapy – Common Side Effects

Immunotherapy medications help the immune system work better to destroy cancer cells. It is used to stop or slow down the growth of cancer and prevent it from spreading.

### **Some common side effects include:**

- Fatigue
- Flu-like symptoms
- Skin reactions

**Ask your health care team** for information on specific side effects of your immunotherapy medication.

## Radiation Therapy – Common Side Effects

Radiation therapy damages cancer cells but can also damage healthy cells in the treatment area. Damage to healthy cells causes side effects. Different people may have different side effects even if they are being treated in the same area. You only get radiation side effects in the area of treatment.

The side effects of radiation therapy will depend on:

- The type of radiation therapy
- The part of your body being treated
- The amount (dose) of radiation and how frequently you receive it
- Your overall health

### **Some common side effects of radiation in general include (depending on the location of treatment):**

- Fatigue
- Skin changes (similar to a sunburn)

- Swallowing changes or sore throat
- Heartburn
- Cough
- Pain flare up
- Nausea
- Cough
- Frequent bowel movements or urination
- Hair loss in treatment area only

Ask your health care team for information on specific side effects based on your treatment schedule and the area of your body receiving radiation therapy.

## Sexuality and Fertility

Side effects from your treatment, such as fatigue, pain or nausea may lower your desire to have sex. Certain drug treatments can lead to physical side effects. This includes early menopause and vaginal dryness for women and erectile dysfunction for men. Changes in your body appearance, feeling anxious about your health, and the emotional stress of treatment can also affect your sexuality. Social workers are available to support you (see the 'Counselling' section).

You should not get pregnant or father a child while you are having drug therapy or radiation therapy or for several months after treatment. Radiation can cause permanent damage to eggs and sperm. Use condoms while either partner is receiving treatment. All bodily fluids contain drug therapy. Certain cancer treatments can lead to problems with fertility, such as:

- Decreased sperm count - consider sperm banking before starting drug therapy or radiation
- Premature menopause - hot flashes, mood swings, and vaginal dryness. Use lubricants if needed.

There are different options for preserving your fertility. If you are within child-bearing years or have questions about changes in your sexuality, speak with a member of your health care team.

## Recommended Resources

### **Remember, your health care team is here to help!**

There are resources available for most side effects that your health care team can give to you and explain during your visit. These resources will help you manage the symptoms at home and tell you when to call for help.

### Online Self-Management Resources

These free courses provide tools and support for individuals living with long-term chronic conditions.

**Self-Management Ontario** visit: <https://www.selfmanagementontario.ca/>

### The Keith Samitt Patient & Family Resource Centre

Visit the Keith Samitt Patient & Family Resource Centre **Centre** on Level 1 of the cancer centre to pick up information on various topics.

Visit [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca) for online versions of booklets and other information.

You can also take-home copies of the **Symptom Management Guides**, available in the Patient and Family Resource Centre and online from **Cancer Care Ontario**.

These guides will help you manage the symptoms and tell you when to call for help.

#### Guides are available for:

- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Shortness of breath
- Pain
- Mouth problems
- Loss of appetite
- Exercise
- Fever