

Drug Therapy

What is Drug Therapy (Systemic Therapy)

Drug therapy, also known as systemic therapy, spreads throughout the body to treat cancer cells. This can include chemotherapy, immunotherapy or targeted therapy. The type of cancer you have determines the medication(s) you receive. Your doctor will discuss your treatment plan with you.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy uses one or more drugs to destroy or control the growth of cancer cells. Chemotherapy drugs are designed to kill all fast-growing cells including cancer cells and some of your own healthy cells.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy drugs work by getting your own immune system to recognize, find, and kill only specific cancer cells, not your healthy cells.

Targeted Therapy

Targeted therapy drugs target specific molecules (e.g. proteins) inside cancer cells or on their surface to stop them from growing and dividing.

How is Drug Therapy Given?

- Through a vein (Intravenous - IV)
- By mouth (oral)

If you will be receiving your drug therapy in a different way, your health care provider will discuss it with you.

Is Drug Therapy Painful?

No. It does not hurt to get drug therapy.

If you feel burning or notice redness or swelling in the area of the needle, tell your Nurse immediately.

When you are home, if you feel pain or notice redness or swelling in the arm where you received drug therapy, call the Telephone Triage Nurse immediately. If it is after hours, call CAREChart@home nursing line or go to the Emergency Department.

Can I Take Other Medications While I am on Drug Therapy?

- Some medication and natural health products can affect systemic therapy.
- Some systemic therapy medication can affect other medications you take.

What to Expect While in the Clinic

Most patients get drug therapy treatment on a separate day from their doctor's appointment. You will:

- Check into the clinic with the receptionist.
- Be given a pager.
- Complete your symptom screen at the kiosk.
- Go for blood work if required. A paper requisition will be given. You'll visit the Verspeeten lab or another hospital area, as directed.
- Be directed to the x-ray department if needed. Return to the clinic and let the receptionist know when you're back.

There are volunteers in the drug therapy suite to provide comfort and support to you and your family.

What to Bring

Some treatments are very short but others can take up to 8 hours. Your nurse will let you know how long you will be. Come prepared with what you need.

- A list of all the medicines, vitamins, herbs, and minerals you take
- Medicine you normally take during the day (e.g., pain, blood pressure)
- A list of your questions
- Insulin (if diabetic)
- Lunch or snacks
- Books, magazines, or iPad
- Insurance forms (including drug plan info)
- Debit or credit card to pay for take-home medicine
- Comfortable layered clothing
- A driver to take you home

Remember: Bring your medication list, including natural health products, to your appointments. Keep it with you at all times in case of an emergency.

When You Arrive for Treatment

- Check in at reception. You'll receive a card with a number.
- Wait in the seating area until your appointment time.
- A nurse will escort you to a bed or chair. One visitor may accompany you.
- The nurse will review your treatment and possible side effects with you.
- Your treatment may begin with an IV.

Side Effects While on Drug Therapy

- You may not have any side effects.
- Most side effects can be managed at home.

- They usually go away after treatment ends.
- Track symptoms in a diary, calendar, or notebook.

More information: Ask your team for side effect information sheets. Side effects vary depending on the drug(s) you receive.

See the "Side Effects" section for more information.

Fever While on Chemotherapy

Keep a good thermometer with you. If you have a fever of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher:

- Tell staff you are receiving chemotherapy and have a fever.
- Show your fever card.

Do not take acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol®) until you talk to your care team.

Fever is a medical emergency. Use a thermometer you understand and can read clearly.

Immune-mediated Side Effects While on Immunotherapy

Your provider will tell you what to watch for based on the medication. Write it down if not provided with a handout. If you visit a family doctor/Emergency Department, tell them:

- You are receiving immunotherapy
- What side effect you are experiencing
- Show them your immunotherapy card

Handling Your Drug Therapy Medication Safely at Home

Special safety measures are needed to help prevent the chemotherapy and some immunotherapy and targeted therapy drugs from touching others by mistake. Your provider will tell you if the information below applies to your immunotherapy or targeted therapy treatment. Equipment and items (e.g. needles) that touch systemic therapy medicine are seen as contaminated and hazardous.

The sections below provide information on how to safely handle drug (systemic) therapy and the waste from drug therapy in your home.

How does the body get rid of drug therapy?

The body gets rid of drug therapy in the urine and the stool. Regardless of how you take this medicine, it can stay in your body for hours and sometimes even days after the treatment is finished. Traces of drug therapy may also be present in sweat, spit, vomit, vaginal fluid, and semen.

Pregnant women should never touch or handle drug therapy medication and contaminated waste.

What should I do when I go to the bathroom?

You may use the toilet as you normally would. However, for the first two days (48 hours) after receiving drug therapy, you should flush the toilet two (2) times with the lid closed when you go to the bathroom. This is to make sure that there is no waste left in the toilet.

Sharing the bathroom with your family is safe as long as all urine and stool are cleaned from the toilet. Septic and sewer systems are not affected.

Wash your hands well with soap and water afterward, and wash your skin if urine or stool gets on it.

If you use a bedpan, urinal or commode, wear gloves when cleaning or emptying containers. Wash the container daily with soap and water.

What should I do if I do not have control of my bladder or bowel?

Use a plastic-backed pad, a disposable diaper or a sheet to absorb urine or stool. Change your soiled clothes right away and wash your skin with soap and water.

If you have an ostomy, gloves need to be worn when emptying or changing bags. Put all disposable ostomy supplies and gloves into two plastic bags and throw away with your regular garbage.

How do I care for my skin?

Drug therapy can irritate the skin. If you accidentally touch drug therapy medications, carefully wash the area with soap and water, then dry. If your skin is irritated or red for more than one hour, call your doctor.

To prevent drug therapy medications from touching the skin, wear gloves when working with drug therapy medication, equipment, and waste.

What should I do if drug therapy gets into my eyes?

If any drug therapy splashes into your eyes, flush them with water for 10-15 minutes and call your doctor.

What should I do with my laundry?

Wash your clothing and bed linen as you normally would unless they become soiled with systemic therapy. If this happens, use gloves to carefully handle the laundry and to avoid contact with your skin. Wash the contaminated laundry two (2) times. Do not wash contaminated laundry with regular laundry.

If you do not have a washer, place the soiled items in a plastic bag and seal it with rubber bands until they can be washed at the laundromat.

How should I store the drug therapy?

Store drug therapy and equipment in a safe place that is out of reach of children and pets. Do not store drug therapy in the bathroom. The humidity can damage the medicine. Check the labels to see if the drug therapy should be kept in a refrigerator or away from light. Be sure that all your medicines have correct labels.

Can I put drug therapy waste in the garbage?

No. Drug therapy waste is hazardous and needs special handling. If you are getting IV drug therapy at home, you will be given a special container to store drug therapy and equipment (e.g. used syringes, needles, tubing, bags, cassettes, vials).

When you finish handling the drug therapy, place any equipment, needles, sharp objects, and gloves into hard plastic containers labeled 'Chemotherapy Waste' or 'Cytotoxic' and make certain they are shut tight.

Equipment and waste that is too large for the plastic container needs to be placed in a separate plastic bag and sealed tightly with rubber bands.

What if I spill the drug therapy?

A Home Spill Kit will be provided for people who have intravenous (IV) drug therapy treatments in the home.

This kit contains all the materials you need to safely clean up the drug therapy in case you spill some of the medicine by accident. Your nurse will give you the information and provide you with written instructions on how to clean a drug therapy spill.

Is it safe for family members to have contact with me during my drug therapy?

Eating together, enjoying your favourite activities, and hugging are all safe for you to do.

What if I become sick and vomit?

Drug therapy may be present in vomit. Wear gloves when cleaning vomit and emptying the container. Rinse the container with water after each use, and wash it with soap and water at least once a day.

Is it safe to have sex during my treatment?

Traces of drug therapy may be present in vaginal fluid and semen for up to 48 hours after treatment. A condom must be used to protect your partner from being exposed to the drugs in these fluids during sex. It is possible to become pregnant or father a child while receiving drug therapy but is not safe to do so. You will need to use a reliable birth control method (e.g. condom) while getting drug therapy.

Please talk to your doctor or nurse about being sexually active during the time you have drug therapy treatments.

Can I travel with my drug therapy?

Traveling is usually not a problem. However, you may need to make special arrangements if the drug therapy requires special storage, like refrigeration. Talk to your nurse, doctor or pharmacist for more instructions. Always seal your drug therapy medicine in a plastic bag.

Staying in a hotel during your drug therapy treatment?

Be sure to take your Home Spill Kit with you when you travel. Let hotel staff know if you have an accident and let them know of any special cleaning that needs to be done.

Pharmacy - Medication Coverage

Most medicines given in the chemotherapy suite are covered by OHIP. You are responsible for the cost of chemotherapy and other medicines that you take at home. Please let a member of your care team know if you need assistance paying for your medicine.

It is important to know:

- Your local or home pharmacy may not have the medicines you need
- Contact the Verspeeten Pharmacist or Telephone Triage Nurse or CAREChart@after hours nurse immediately if you have a reaction to any medicine

Complementary and Alternative Therapies

- Complementary therapies are used with your cancer treatment plan.
- Alternative therapies are used instead of a conventional treatment.
- Some complementary and alternative therapies may be harmful while you are taking systemic therapy drugs or could make them less effective.
- It is important to talk with your Verspeeten health care team about any therapies you are receiving outside of the cancer centre.
- See the 'Just Diagnosed' and 'Nutrition' sections for more information on complementary and alternative therapies

Clinical Trials

If you are participating in a Clinical Trial, you will need to bring your consent forms every time you are with a health care professional (e.g., emergency doctor, check-up with your family doctor, etc.). For more information, speak to your health care team or visit our website.

Recommended Resources

Visit the Canadian Cancer Society website to view the "Chemotherapy and other drug therapies" booklet.