

Managing Treatment Side Effects

Every person's experience with cancer treatment is unique. Knowing what side effects to expect can help you prepare for them. Being well informed can help you and your health care team to create a plan to manage or even prevent some side effects of cancer treatment. This is important so that you can have the best possible quality of life during treatment and also be able to complete treatment in a timely manner. It is also important to talk with your health care team about what kinds of side effects will be hardest for you to manage since there may be a choice of treatment options.

Fatigue

Fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer treatment. Treatment-related fatigue can leave you feeling too tired to do the things you need to want to do. This type of tiredness is generally not connected to your amount of physical activity or sleep. For many cancer patients, it is one of the most frustrating side effects that interfere with usual day-to-day activities. Fatigue can gradually increase over the course of the treatment; and it can last for a period of time after treatment ends. Some tips to manage fatigue are to take naps, ask others for help, eat well, drink plenty of liquids, reduce stress and try to do some physical activity each day.

Nausea and Vomiting

Some cancer treatments can cause nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) and vomiting. There are many medications that can help or prevent this. Some medications are given right before or along with your cancer treatment. Be sure to talk with your nurse or doctor if you are having nausea and vomiting. Some tips to control nausea and vomiting are: eating small light meals throughout the day; avoiding foods that have a strong smell, greasy or spicy; eating foods that are warm or cool rather than hot or cold; use deep breathing and relaxation methods.

Changes in Bowel Habits

Medications, surgery, inactivity, dietary changes are just a few of the things that can change your normal bowel habits. You may have diarrhea (frequent loose bowel movements) or be constipated (feeling like you have to move your bowels but not being able to). For diarrhea, be sure to drink plenty of water, avoid caffeine and very hot or very cold drinks. Eat several smaller, low fiber meals throughout the day. To manage constipation, drink lots of fluids, try to get some physical activity every day and talk to your doctor about adding a fiber supplement or other medications to prevent constipation.

Infections

Infection can be a serious side effect of cancer treatment. Cancer treatment can cause a drop in your white blood cells which help your body fight off infection. Some signs of infection include a fever, chills, redness or swelling around a wound or catheter, mouth sores, unusual vaginal discharge, cloudy urine, sore throat or cough. You can prevent infection by washing your hands frequently. Avoid people who are sick or large crowds. Contact your doctor immediately if you have a fever or other symptoms.

Other Side Effects

Less common but still possible side effects include, mouth sores and dry mouth, changes in taste or smell, changes in your skin and nails, bleeding, nerve damage, pain, loss of fertility and sexual problems, hair loss, problems with memory (chemobrain). Not everyone will experience side effects but it is important to discuss any concerns or any side effects you are having with your doctor.