

Understanding

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# Chemotherapy

Caring for people with cancer



## Understanding

# Chemotherapy

This booklet has been written to help you understand more about chemotherapy. It has been prepared and checked by cancer doctors, other relevant specialists, nurses and patients. The information here is an agreed view on chemotherapy, how it is given and how it may affect you.

If you are a patient, your doctor or nurse may go through the booklet with you and mark sections that are important for you. You can also make a note below of the contact names and information you may need.



Specialist nurse

Tel:

Hospital

Tel:

Family doctor (GP)

Tel:

Surgeon

Tel:

Medical oncologist

Tel:

Radiation oncologist

Tel:

Emergency

Tel:

Medical social worker

Tel:

Treatments

Review dates

If you like, you can also add:

Your name

Address



This booklet has been produced by the Irish Cancer Society to meet the need for improved communication, information and support for cancer patients and their families throughout diagnosis and treatment. We would like to thank all those patients, families and professionals whose support and advice made this publication possible.

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The following sources were used in the publication of this booklet:

- *DeVita, Hellman, and Rosenberg's Cancer: Principles and Practice of Oncology*. R Govindan (editor), 9th edn. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2011.
- *Cancer Nursing: Principles and Practice*. CH Yarbrow, MH Frogge, M Goodman & SL Groenwald. Jones and Bartlett, 2000.
- *The Chemotherapy Source Book*. M Perry. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 1997.

First published by the Irish Cancer Society in 2004.

© Irish Cancer Society, 2004, revised 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015

Next revise: 2017

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ISBN 0-95323-690-1

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## Introduction

This booklet has been written to help you understand more about chemotherapy. We hope it answers some questions you may have about this type of cancer treatment. The information is divided into four parts:

- **About chemotherapy** describes how chemotherapy works and how it is given.
- **Treatment and side-effects** looks at how chemotherapy is planned and how to manage some of the more common side-effects.
- **Coping and emotions** discusses how you can cope with your feelings and the emotional effects of having cancer.
- **Support resources** gives information on further sources of help and support. This includes helpful organisations, books, support groups and websites. You will also find an easy-to-read explanation of words and terms used throughout this booklet.

You are likely to have questions and concerns about your own treatment which this booklet does not answer. This is because there are over 200 different types of cancer and many chemotherapy treatments. It is best to discuss details of your own treatment with your doctor, as the best choice for you will depend on your particular cancer and your individual circumstances.



### Reading this booklet

You do not need to know everything about chemotherapy straight away. Read a section about a particular item as it happens to you. Then when you feel relaxed and want to know more, read another section.



If you do not understand something that has been written, discuss it with your doctor or nurse. You can also call the National Cancer Helpline on Freefone 1800 200 700, if you wish. It is open Monday to Thursday 9am–7pm and Friday 9am–5pm. Or you can visit a Daffodil Centre. See page 70 for more about Daffodil Centres.

## About chemotherapy

### What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is a treatment using drugs that cure or control cancer. Not all forms of cancer are treated by chemotherapy, as other treatments may work better. Also, some cancers are not sensitive to chemotherapy drugs and so are not used.

The drugs mainly used are cytotoxic. This means that they interrupt the way cancer cells grow and divide, but they also affect normal cells. Other drugs, like biological therapies, are aimed directly at specific cancer cells and mostly do not harm normal cells. At present, there are about 70 types of chemotherapy drugs available. These can be given on their own or in combination.

### How does chemotherapy work?

Chemotherapy drugs affect how a cancer cell divides and grows. In the centre of each living cell is the nucleus. This is the control centre of the cell. It contains chromosomes that are made up of genes. Each time a cell divides to make more cells, these genes must be copied exactly. Once chemotherapy drugs are in your bloodstream, they can reach cancer cells in your body. Chemotherapy damages the genes inside the cancer cell, preventing them from growing.

Some fast-growing, normal cells like those in the lining of your mouth, your bone marrow (which makes blood cells), hair roots, digestive system and your reproductive organs also take up these drugs. Healthy cells usually repair the damage caused by chemotherapy but cancer cells cannot and so eventually die. Damage to the normal cells is usually short term and most side-effects will disappear once the treatment is over. But chemotherapy can cause long-term side-effects that do not go away. For detailed information on side-effects, see pages 25–40.

## Why is chemotherapy given?

There are many reasons why chemotherapy is given. Sometimes it can be given for more than one reason.

**Curing cancer:** Chemotherapy can destroy some cancers and cure the disease. The cancer cells will no longer be present in your body.

**Reducing the size of cancer:** Chemotherapy can be given to shrink a cancer before surgery or radiotherapy. This can make it easier to remove during surgery or make radiotherapy work better. If curing the cancer is not possible, it can shrink cancers that are causing pain and pressure.

**Preventing cancer coming back:** Chemotherapy may be given after surgery or radiotherapy to destroy any remaining cancer cells. Sometimes cancer cells are so tiny they cannot be seen on X-rays or scans.

**Controlling cancer:** Chemotherapy can help cancer from spreading, slow its growth, or destroy cancer cells that have spread to other parts of your body.

**Easing cancer symptoms:** If a cure is not possible, chemotherapy may be given to shrink and control the cancer, or to reduce the number of cancer cells. This may then improve your quality of life. This is called palliative treatment.

## When is chemotherapy used?

Sometimes chemotherapy is the only cancer treatment used. But sometimes you will get chemotherapy along with surgery, radiotherapy, hormone or biological therapy.

- **Before an operation or radiotherapy:** Chemotherapy can be used before surgery to shrink the tumour and make it easier to remove. This is called neo-adjuvant chemotherapy. Chemotherapy can also be used to make a tumour smaller before radiotherapy so that treatment works better.
- **After an operation:** At times chemotherapy is given after surgery when the tumour has been removed but there is still a risk that some

tiny cancer cells remain. In this case chemotherapy will try to destroy these cancer cells and improve your chances of a cure. This is known as adjuvant chemotherapy.

- **During radiotherapy:** Chemotherapy can be given at the same time as radiotherapy to make the treatment work better. This is called chemoradiotherapy.
- **With advanced cancer:** If cancer has spread to nearby tissues or other parts of your body, chemotherapy can be given to shrink and control the tumour. It can improve your quality of life and also prolong it. Chemotherapy used in this way can help to control symptoms caused by cancer.
- **Before a bone marrow or stem cell transplant:** With some types of cancer, for example, leukaemia, high-dose chemotherapy can be given. This will involve an infusion of stem cells or bone marrow cells afterwards. Normally this happens after the first chemotherapy treatment has destroyed the cancer cells but there is a greater risk of the cancer returning. For more information, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

Remember chemotherapy is not used for every cancer as some cancers are not sensitive to it. Do speak to your doctor or nurse specialist if you have any questions about your treatment.

## How does my doctor decide which drugs to use?

Your doctor's choice of drug or drugs depends on:

- The type of cancer you have. Some kinds of chemotherapy drugs are used for many types of cancer. Other drugs are used for just one or two types of cancer.
- If you have had chemotherapy before.
- If you have other health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease or kidney disease.
- Your age and your fitness level

For information on a particular drug, see the Irish Cancer Society website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

Your doctor may also ask you to take part in a research trial. This is where a new drug is being tested on patients, which has been proved to be safe. See page 22 for more details about research trials.

>>> For information on particular drugs, see the Irish Cancer Society website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

### Naming chemotherapy drugs

Like all drugs, chemotherapy drugs usually have two names: the generic name and the brand name. The generic name is the chemical name of a drug, for example, paracetamol. The brand name or trade name is the name given by the manufacturer of the drug, for example, Panadol. Sometimes drugs are known by their generic or brand names. Do ask your doctor or nurse if you would like more information about the name or names of the drugs you are taking.

Cancer is often treated with a combination of anti-cancer drugs. These combinations used by your doctor are often known by a word made up from the first letters of the drug names (an acronym). For example, AC is adriamycin and cyclophosphamide.



### To sum up

- Chemotherapy is a treatment using drugs that cure or control cancer.
- Chemotherapy damages the genes inside cancer cells, which prevents them from growing.
- Chemotherapy is given to shrink cancer, cure or control it or to prevent it coming back, or to ease symptoms like pain or bleeding.
- Chemotherapy can be given before or after surgery, before or with radiotherapy, with advanced cancer, or before a bone marrow/stem cell transplant.

## How are the drugs given?

There are many ways to give chemotherapy drugs. The two most common ways are:

- **Intravenously** – injected into a vein or by drip infusion.
- **By mouth** (orally) – as capsules or tablets.

Less common ways are:

- **Intramuscularly** – injected into a muscle in your thigh or buttock.
- **Subcutaneously** – injected under your skin.
- **Intra-arterially** – injected into an artery.
- **Intrathecally** – injected into the fluid around your spinal cord. In some conditions, such as leukaemia or lymphoma, cancer cells can pass into the fluid that surrounds your brain and spinal cord.
- **Intracavity** – injected into a body cavity, for example, your bladder. The drug is flushed in through a tube and may be drained out again some time later.
- **Intralesional** – injected directly into a tumour.
- **Topically** – as creams put on your skin. These creams are mainly used for some types of skin cancer and applied regularly for a few weeks. They are usually covered with a dressing.

Sometimes two or more ways may be used together. For example, your treatment may involve three different drugs; two of them could be given by injection and the third one as a tablet. Do ask your doctor or nurse if you would like more information about the ways of giving chemotherapy.

### Intravenous therapy (IV)

Chemotherapy drugs are usually given by injection into a vein using a syringe or through an infusion.

- **By injection** – the drugs are injected into a drip. It can last from a few minutes to 20 minutes.
- **By infusion (drip)** – drugs are diluted in a large bag of liquid and go in slowly over several hours.

- **Continuous infusion by drip or pump** – at home you may receive a very slow release of a drug over 7 days. The amount of drug given is controlled by a pump which is small enough to sit in a pouch attached to your body.

## Ways of injecting drugs

Chemotherapy drugs can be given directly into a vein using the following devices:

- 1 **Cannula** – a short, thin tube is put into a vein in your arm or the back of your hand.
- 2 **Central line** – a thin flexible tube is put in through the skin of your chest or neck and into a vein in your chest.
- 3 **PICC line** (peripherally inserted central catheter) – a thin, flexible tube is put into a vein in your arm and then put in (threaded through) to a vein in your chest.
- 4 **Implantable port** (sometimes called a portacath) – a thin, soft, plastic tube is put into a vein. It has an opening (port) under the skin on your chest.

### 1 Cannula

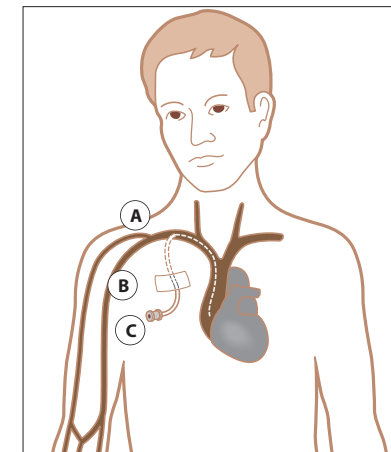
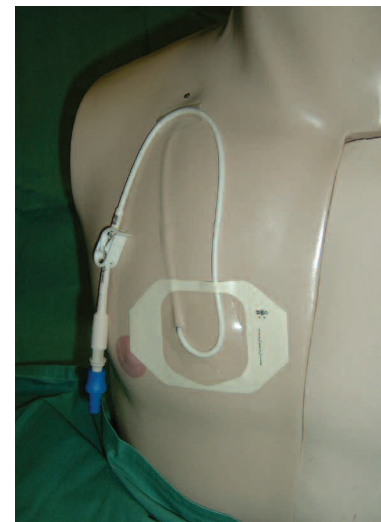
The cannula is put into a vein in the back of your hand or arm and secured with a clear dressing. It is normally removed after your treatment. But if you need to stay in hospital, it may be left in place for a few days. The chemotherapy drugs can be given through the cannula as an injection or injected into a bag to dilute them. These days chemotherapy is often given through a pump so that your nurse can control how much of the drug you get over a set period of time.

While the drug is being given, sometimes people may experience some discomfort, pain, swelling, burning or a change in sensation around the cannula area. This may be due to a small leakage of the drug into your tissues. Though this does not happen often, if it does, let your nurse or doctor know straight away.



## 2 Central line

A central line is a long, thin, hollow tube that is inserted into a vein in your chest. It is sometimes called a skin-tunnelled central venous catheter. A central line may also be called by its brand name. For example, Hickman® or Groshong®.



**A** The central line is placed in a large vein here  
**B** The line is threaded under your skin  
**C** The line reaches the surface of your skin here

Your central line will be put in at the hospital by a doctor. You will usually be given a local anaesthetic, but sometimes a general anaesthetic is used. Before the procedure, your neck will be checked for a suitable vein using a small ultrasound machine.

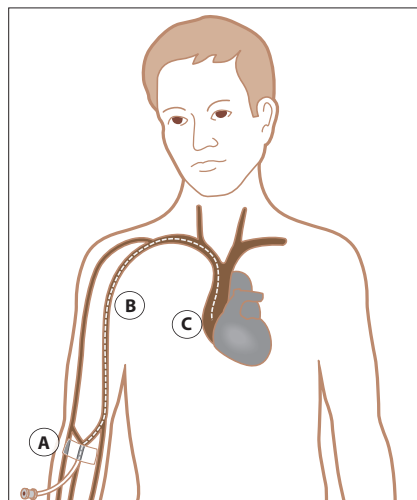
Your doctor will then make a small cut in the skin near your collarbone and gently put (thread) the tip of the line into a large vein just above your heart. The other end of the line is put in (tunnelled) under your skin to reach the exit site. This is where it comes out of your body. You will have a chest X-ray afterwards to make sure the line is in the right place.

Around the central line, you will feel a small 'cuff' just under the skin. The tissue under your skin will grow around this cuff in about three weeks and hold the line safely in place. Until this happens, you will have a stitch holding the line in place.

### 3 PICC lines

A PICC (peripherally inserted central venous catheter) line is a long, thin, hollow tube that your doctor puts into a vein near the bend in your elbow. You will be given a local anaesthetic to numb the area before the line is put in.

The doctor gently threads the line along the vein until the tip sits in a large vein in your chest. The end of the line comes out just below the crook of your elbow. Once it is in place, the PICC line is taped firmly to your arm to prevent it being pulled out of the vein.



**A** The PICC line is inserted in a vein here  
**B** The line is threaded under your skin  
**C** The tip of the line sits in a large vein in your chest here

### 4 Implantable ports (portacaths)

An implantable port is a thin, soft plastic tube with a rubber disc (port) at the end. It can be put in under a general or local anaesthetic. The tube is inserted into a vein until its tip sits just above your heart and the port lies under the skin on your upper chest. You cannot see the port as it is underneath your skin, but you will be able to feel it like a small bump.



A special needle called a Huber needle is put into the port in the hospital to allow the drugs to be given through the port. Blood can also be taken from the vein through the port. The implantable port can be used for as long as is needed.

### Caring for your line or implantable port

Before you go home, the nurses will show you how to care for your line or port. If you find this difficult, your nurse will arrange a nurse in your community to do it or they will show a relative or friend how to do it for you.

### Possible problems with your line or implantable port

Most people won't have any serious problems with their line or port, but possible problems can include blockage and infection. Your nurse will tell you what to look out for. Contact the hospital for advice straight away if you have:

- Soreness, redness or darkening of the skin around the line or port
- Fluid leaking from the skin around the line or port
- Swelling of your arm, chest, neck or shoulder
- Pain in your chest, arm or neck
- A high temperature. Most hospitals say that a temperature above 38°C (100.4°F) is high, but some use a lower or higher temperature. The cancer doctors and nurses at your hospital will advise you.

You should also contact the hospital if you are feeling shivery or unwell after your line or port has been flushed.



### Tips & Hints – caring for your line or implantable port



- Keep the site clean and dry.
- Be careful when removing your clothes, so the line does not get caught.
- When showering or bathing, place a shower sleeve or clingfilm over the site. Your nurse will discuss this with you.
- Avoid swimming, as it may cause infection.
- Do not lift heavy objects with the arm containing your PICC line.
- Wear loose-fitting tops or shirts for easy access.



- Avoid sports like tennis, badminton or hurling, as they might dislodge the line.
- Do not pull or tug on the tubing.
- If you are worried that your site is showing signs of infection or clotting, contact the day unit immediately.
- If your line falls out, place a clean dressing over the site.
- If the wound bleeds, apply pressure with a clean dressing.
- If the line falls out at home, do not throw it away but bring it to the hospital.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about the different ways of getting intravenous chemotherapy. They will explain the different options to you. Remember the type of line you are given can depend on the chemotherapy drugs that are used, their doses and the length of time you are expected to be on treatment. A line might also be put in if your medical team feels that your veins will not tolerate the chemotherapy.

### Continuous infusion

Continuous infusion is when you receive a controlled amount of chemotherapy through a special pump. Pumps are often attached to catheters or ports. They can control how much and how quickly chemotherapy goes into a catheter or port. An external pump remains outside your body and you can carry it around with you. Usually it is small enough to fit in a pocket.

Over a period of time the pump slowly releases the drug into your bloodstream. The length of time you wear the pump will vary and your doctor or nurse will explain this to you. The pump can be linked to either a central line or a PICC line.

The hospital's pharmacy staff usually prepare the drugs and you, or a family member or friend, will be taught how to use and look after the pump. Pumps work in different ways. Your nurse will give you full instructions on how to care for them. If you need advice when at home, contact the day unit at the hospital.

>>> If you notice any leakage of the drug from the pump or the tube, let the nurse at the hospital know immediately.

### Leakage of drugs (extravasation)

Extravasation occurs when chemotherapy drugs leak into the tissues around the vein when they are being given. It is uncommon but can occur if your cannula dislodges from the vein. It rarely ever occurs with a central line. Do tell your nurse if you notice any pain, swelling or redness at the cannula site during your treatment. Leakage can be successfully treated if noticed early.

### Chemotherapy tablets or capsules

Taking tablets or capsules at home may also be part of your treatment. They may be all the treatment you need or you may have intravenous drugs as well. Your doctor or nurse will explain:

- When to take the tablets or capsules
- How often to take them
- Whether to take them with food or not
- How to handle the tablets
- How to store them, for example, in a fridge or cool place
- What to do if you forget to take your tablets

When taking chemotherapy tablets, they should never be touched with bare hands as they may cause skin irritation. Place them in a spoon or small cup instead. Wash your hands afterwards. If someone is helping you, make sure they wear gloves. Store the tablets in a safe place and keep them away from children.

If you cannot take your tablets for any reason or if you are sick soon afterwards, contact your doctor or nurse immediately for advice. If you forget to take your tablets, don't take a double dose the next day.

The drug prescription given to you by your doctor will be for a full course of treatment. For this reason, you must take them exactly as prescribed. If you need more supplies, talk to your hospital doctor, who can contact your local pharmacy.



## To sum up

Chemotherapy can be given in different ways.

- The most common ways are by injection into a vein (intravenously) or by mouth.
- The less common ways are by injection into muscles or under your skin, by injection into an artery, or the fluid around your spine, directly into a cavity such as your abdomen or bladder or directly into a tumour, or as a cream put on your skin.

## Where do I go for chemotherapy?

Where you go for chemotherapy depends on the drugs you are prescribed and the way they are given. Some intravenous chemotherapy is given during visits to a day hospital or clinic, without needing to stay overnight. Usually it can take anything from half an hour to a few hours. Sometimes an overnight stay is needed or for a few days. Some people may be able to have their chemotherapy at home.

Some chemotherapy treatments are given slowly over a number of days using an infusion pump. Occasionally, chemotherapy treatments, like high-dose chemotherapy, will mean you need to stay in hospital for longer, perhaps a few weeks.

Before your treatment starts, your doctor or nurse will explain exactly what it will involve. Do ask as many questions about your treatment as possible. Write down new questions as you think of them. Use the fill-in form at the back of this booklet to help you. You can also call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre for information and advice.

National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700



## Hints & Tips – having chemotherapy at home

- Avoid direct contact with the chemotherapy drugs.
- Wash skin with soap and water if chemotherapy spills on your skin. Contact the hospital if any redness or irritation caused by the spillage does not clear within an hour.
- If you notice any leakage of the drug from the pump or the tube, let your doctor or nurse at the hospital know straight away.
- Wear gloves when handling clothing or bedsheets soiled with vomit or diarrhoea.
- Check with your pharmacist or nurse on how the chemotherapy tablets, capsules or injections should be stored.
- Store all drugs out of reach of children to prevent serious harm if taken by accident.
- If another person or child takes your tablets by mistake, contact a doctor straight away.
- If you feel sick or unwell at any time, phone the nurse or doctor at the hospital for advice.





## Treatment and side-effects

### How does the doctor plan my treatment?

When planning your treatment, there are some things your doctor will take into account:

- The type of cancer you have
- Where it is in your body
- If it has spread or not
- Where it has spread to (if at all)
- Your age
- Your general health and fitness

Some drugs affect your body more than others. As a result, your doctor must judge if you are well enough to cope with any side-effects of the treatment before it starts. How often you have treatment and how long it lasts can depend on:

- The type of cancer
- The chemotherapy drugs used
- How the cancer cells respond to the drugs
- Any side-effects from the drugs

Your doctor or nurse specialist will explain your treatment plan beforehand. Do ask as many questions as you like. Don't be afraid to repeat a question if you do not understand the answer. You can use the fill-in form at the back of this booklet for your questions. It can also help to bring a close relative or friend with you to remind you of the questions you want to ask.

### Cycles and courses of treatment

The treatment your doctor decides to give you is based on years of research. Chemotherapy is usually given in a course of treatments. This course can last weeks or months. A course is made up of cycles and you might have 6-8 cycles of treatment. Each cycle involves the day or days of chemotherapy followed by a rest period, when you have no treatment and your body is recovering.

Treatment cycles differ and will depend on your type of cancer and the chemotherapy drugs you are receiving. For example, you might have a 4-week cycle. You may get your chemotherapy drugs on day 1 and nothing from day 2 to 28. Your cycle starts again then and is called cycle 2. Sometimes you might have a weekly or 2-weekly cycle. Do ask your nurse or doctor about your treatment plan.

You may notice that other patients are having different treatments to you, even though they have the same type of cancer as you. Don't let this worry you, as everyone's treatment is individual.

Sometimes your treatment may be delayed if your body needs more time to recover. Again, the number of cycles you have will depend on the stage of your cancer and how well you respond to treatment. It may take several months to complete your chemotherapy.

## Deciding on treatment

When faced with a life-threatening illness, it can sometimes be hard to decide what the right treatment is for you. It may feel as if everything is happening too fast. You may feel under pressure to make a decision. Often you might want more time to think things through. But remember there is always time for you to consider what sort of treatment you want.

You have the right to find out what a treatment option means for you, and the right to accept or refuse it. If you want to refuse treatment, let your doctor or nurse know your reasons and concerns first. They will tell you what can happen if you do not accept treatment. It may help to talk to your GP as well.

»»» Make sure you are fully informed of the benefits and risks of treatment.

### Benefits and risks

It is important to know why your treatment is being given. Treatment can be given for different reasons and the benefits will vary depending on your situation. It may be a question of curing, preventing or controlling cancer or improving your quality of life.

Some people will choose to be treated, even when there is only a small benefit. Others want to make sure the benefits of treatment outweigh any side-effects, and others will choose the option that offers the best quality of life. It can help to discuss with your cancer specialist how much difference the chemotherapy may make in your own situation.

### Giving consent for treatment

You should be asked to sign a consent form saying that you give permission for chemotherapy to be given. No medical treatment can be given without your consent. Before treatment, you should know:

- The type and amount of treatment you are advised to have
- The benefits and risks of the treatment
- Any other treatments that may be available
- Any major risks or side-effects of the treatment

If you are confused about the information given to you, let your doctor or nurse know straight away. They can explain it to you again. Some cancer treatments are hard to understand and may need to be explained more than once. You can also ask for printed information to take home and read in your own time. You can always ask for more time to decide about the treatment, if you are unsure when it is first explained to you.

### Talking with doctors and family/friends

Talking it over can help you to decide the right course of action for you.

- Talk to your doctor a few times before deciding on treatment.
- Don't worry if you ask the same questions over and over again.
- Write down your questions before seeing your doctor.
- Bring a family member or friend to take part in the conversation or just listen.
- Take notes during the visit.
- Talk to people who you think might help: your family or friends, nursing staff, GP, medical social worker, chaplain, religious leader or adviser.
- Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.
- If you are concerned, a second opinion from another cancer specialist may reassure you.

### A second opinion

You may like to get a second opinion from another cancer specialist. Many patients feel uncomfortable doing this but it happens more and more often now. In fact, most doctors welcome another doctor's views. Your doctor or GP may be able to recommend a specialist for this consultation.

Afterwards, you may feel more confident about your choices or the treatment advised by your specialist. You can ask for a second opinion, even if treatment has started or you still want to be treated by your first doctor.



### Research – what is a clinical trial?



Research into new ways of treating cancer goes on all the time. By using new drugs or new combinations of drugs and treatments that are already in use, doctors can find new and better ways of treating cancer. Many cancer patients take part in research studies today. Even though the word 'research' or 'new drug' sometimes scares people, there is no need for fear. Before a drug or treatment is used on patients, it goes through many stages to make sure it is safe to use.

#### Phases of research

There are many stages or phases when research is being done. If a drug or treatment looks as if it might be useful in treating cancer, it is given to patients in research studies called clinical trials. These aim to find a safe dose, see what side-effects may occur, and identify which cancers can be treated.

If early studies suggest that a new drug may be both safe and effective, further trials are carried out. These aim to:

- Find out if the treatment is better than ones already in use.
- Find out if there are more benefits when the new treatment is given together with current ones.
- Compare the new treatment with current best standard treatments.

#### Taking part in clinical trials

Your doctor may ask you to try a new treatment. There are many benefits to this. You will be helping to improve knowledge about cancer and new

treatments. There is no need for worry as you will be followed closely during and after the study.

You cannot be included in a clinical trial without your permission. You can only give this consent if the trial has been fully explained to you, so that you understand what it is about. This is called informed consent. You will also need time to think about it and discuss it with your family or friends. If you decide not to take part, you will still be given the best proven treatment available. Even after agreeing to take part in a trial, you can still withdraw at any time if you change your mind. As part of research into the causes of cancer, your doctors may ask your permission to store some samples of your cancer cells or blood.

For more information on clinical trials, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit our website: [www.cancer.ie/cancer-information/treatments/clinical-trials](http://www.cancer.ie/cancer-information/treatments/clinical-trials)

### How will I know if the chemotherapy is working?

After a few cycles of treatment, your doctor may arrange some tests and exams. These tests will show if the cancer has shrunk or disappeared. They may include blood tests, X-rays and scans. If chemotherapy is being given as a palliative treatment, the relief of your cancer symptoms may tell you if the treatment has worked. If chemotherapy is used to prevent a recurrence, it may not be possible to say if this treatment has worked at that stage. Do ask your doctor about your test results and what they show about your progress.

Your doctor will also ask how well you feel. Tests and exams can tell a lot about how chemotherapy is working, whereas side-effects tell very little. You cannot tell if chemotherapy is working based on its side-effects. Sometimes people think that if they have no side-effects, the drugs are not working. Or if they do have side-effects, the drugs are working well. But side-effects can vary so much between people and between drugs that they are not a reliable sign of the treatment working or not.

## Changes in your treatment plan

Sometimes, depending on the results of the tests, your treatment plan may need to be changed. It may be because the drugs are not shrinking the cancer enough. In other cases, it can be because the drugs are starting to cause damage to particular parts of your body, such as your bone marrow, kidneys, liver or the nerves in your hands and feet. A change to the drugs you are receiving may be needed. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

## What tests will I need before and during treatment?

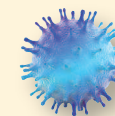
Some of the following tests may be done before or during treatment:

- **Weight and height:** Your weight and height will be checked before the first cycle of treatment. This is so your doctor can work out the right dose for you.
- **Blood or urine tests:** Before each cycle of treatment, you will have blood tests done to check your kidney, liver, red cell, white cell and platelet function. These blood tests can show if you are fit for treatment and see how your body is responding to the drugs. Sometimes urine tests will be done to see the effect of chemotherapy on your body. Your urine may be collected for 24 hours.
- **Physical exam:** This will be done before each cycle of treatment.
- **X-rays and scans:** Sometimes you may need X-rays and scans. These are to check that you are fit for treatment and to see how the tumour is responding to treatment. For example, a chest X-ray.
- **Heart monitoring:** Some drugs can affect your heart so you may need a recording of your heartbeat (ECG) or heart ultrasound (ECHO). Sometimes a multigated acquisition (MUGA) scan might be done to check if your heart is pumping blood properly.
- **Lung function tests:** Some chemotherapy drugs can affect your lungs, so they will be checked regularly.

You may have to wait for the results of the blood tests before treatment can begin. To help pass the time in hospital, either waiting for tests or treatment, it can help to bring a book, newspaper/magazine, crosswords or your CD player, iPod or iPad.

## Biological therapies

Biological therapies are a treatment that uses your immune system to fight cancer. It is not chemotherapy, but you might receive one of these therapies together with chemotherapy. There are several types of biological therapies, including monoclonal antibodies, cancer growth inhibitors, vaccines and gene therapies. They can also be called immunotherapy. The side-effects of these drugs are different to chemotherapy drugs. Please visit our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) for further information on the individual drugs.



## What are the side-effects of chemotherapy?

Side-effects are problems caused by cancer treatment. Some common ones are fatigue, nausea, vomiting, lowered blood cell counts, hair loss and mouth sores. Your doctors and nurses will let you know which drugs you are taking and their side-effects.

### 1 Will I get side-effects from chemotherapy?

Every patient is different, so you may get many side-effects, some, or none at all. It all depends on the type and amount of drugs you get and how your body reacts to them.

### 2 Why do I get side-effects?

Chemotherapy affects all cells that grow quickly in your body. This includes both cancer cells and healthy cells. Healthy cells that grow quickly are found in your mouth and digestive system, in your bone marrow where blood cells are made, and in your hair and skin. Chemotherapy causes side-effects when it damages these healthy cells. Your doctor and nurse will explain to you beforehand which side-effects to expect.

### 3 How long do side-effects last?

Side-effects, if they happen, can be either short term or long term. Most side-effects are short term. But sometimes it can take months or even years for them to clear up. Chemotherapy can also cause long-term side-effects that do not go away. These may include damage to your heart, lungs, nerves, kidneys, or reproductive organs. Do ask your doctor or nurse if you are likely to get any long-term side-effects.

### 4 What can be done about side-effects?

These days, there are ways to prevent or control some side-effects. Tell your doctor and nurse as soon as possible about any changes you notice or anything that is making you unwell. He or she can give you medication to help or else make changes to your treatment to ease any side-effects.

### 5 What possible side-effects can I expect?

There are a number of possible side-effects of chemotherapy. These are listed below. Again you may experience only some or none of them.

#### Possible side-effects include:

Infection	Diarrhoea	Hearing changes
Anaemia	Constipation	Balance and co-ordination problems
Bleeding and bruising	Mouth, throat and taste changes	Eyesight problems
Blood clots	Hair loss	Mental confusion and memory problems
Kidney and bladder problems	Fatigue	Anxiety and depression
Nausea and vomiting	Skin and nail changes	Infertility
Loss of appetite	Nerve changes	

#### Infection

Chemotherapy drugs make you more likely to get infections. This happens because most of the drugs affect the bone marrow where white blood cells are made. These cells help the body fight infection.

If you do not have enough white cells (neutropenia), even a small infection like a cold or a sore throat could make you ill. During each treatment cycle you will have blood tests to make sure you have enough white blood cells. Seven to 14 days after your chemotherapy treatment, your white blood cells are usually at their lowest. But this can vary with the type of drug given.

»»» If you have a high temperature of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher, contact the hospital straight away. If you feel unwell but do not have a temperature, contact the hospital anyway.

You will be asked to watch out for signs of infection at all times, especially if your white cell count is low. These signs could include feeling shivery and unwell or running a high temperature of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher, having a cough, pain passing urine, or redness at the drip site. If this happens, contact the hospital straight away, even at night-time. Some hospitals prefer you to ring the ward directly. Check this with your nurse or doctor before you start treatment. If you have a high temperature or feel unwell, you will need to have a blood test to see if your white cells are low. You may also need antibiotics or other medication in hospital to treat the infection.

You will be more at risk of picking up infections. Try to avoid crowds or close contact (such as hugging or kissing) with people who have colds or flu and other infections, such as chickenpox, shingles or measles. Let your doctor know if you are in contact with these or any other infections. Wash your hands often during the day, especially before you eat and after going to the toilet. Infection is a serious complication of chemotherapy. It needs to be treated as soon as possible. Talk to your doctor or nurse, who will give you more advice.

Your doctor might also give you drugs called growth factors, sometimes called G-CSF. It is given by injection under the skin (subcutaneously). These will help your bone marrow to make more white blood cells quickly. As a result, they reduce the risk of infection.

#### Anaemia

Chemotherapy can also cause the bone marrow to make fewer red blood cells (less haemoglobin). Fewer red blood cells is called anaemia.

Red blood cells are needed to carry oxygen around your body. With anaemia, your heart must work harder to get enough oxygen. Anaemia can make you feel tired and weak, short of breath, dizzy, faint or light-headed and your muscles and joints can ache. Regular blood tests to measure your red cell count will be done during treatment. You may be given a blood transfusion to help your breathlessness and give you more energy. Once the chemotherapy is over, the tiredness will ease off gradually. However, some people still feel tired for a year or more after treatment.

Your doctor might give you a drug called erythropoietin to help your bone marrow make more red blood cells quickly. It is given as an injection in your thigh or abdomen. Sometimes your doctor and dietitian may give you advice about taking iron or vitamins.

### **Bleeding and bruising**

Chemotherapy can affect the number of platelets made in your bone marrow. Platelets are needed to help make your blood clot and stop any bleeding if you hurt yourself. With fewer platelets, you may bleed or bruise very easily, get nosebleeds or bleed more heavily than usual from small cuts or grazes or during your periods. A low platelet count is called thrombocytopenia.

Let your doctor or nurse know straight away if you are bruising easily, have unexplained bleeding or notice tiny red spots under your skin, which can look like a rash. You may need a platelet transfusion.

During treatment, you will have regular blood tests to count the number of platelets in your blood. While on treatment, avoid any injury. For example, use an electric razor when shaving, or when gardening wear thick rubber gloves to protect yourself from cuts and grazes. Check with your doctor or nurse before taking any vitamins, herbs, minerals, dietary supplements, aspirin, or other over-the-counter medicines.

### **Blood clots**

You have a higher risk of developing blood clots if you have cancer. This risk is further increased when you are receiving chemotherapy. Blood clots can occur in different parts of your body but mainly in your legs or chest. Symptoms include redness, swelling or pain in your leg or breathlessness, or chest pain if it occurs in your chest.

Do let your doctor or nurse know if you have any of these symptoms as blood clots can be very serious. Usually they are treated with medication to thin your blood.

### **Kidney and bladder problems**

Some chemotherapy drugs can damage the cells in your kidneys and bladder. As a result, you may have burning or pain when you empty your bladder, have urgency or frequency, be unable to pass urine, incontinence, or blood in your urine. Some drugs can change the colour of urine as well.

Blood and urine tests will be done regularly to check your kidneys. Fluids can help to flush out the chemotherapy from your kidneys and bladder. Before each treatment, fluids may be given by drip into your vein for several hours. Drink as much as you can – about 1½ litres per day. Avoid, where possible, drinks that contain caffeine. For example, tea, coffee, coca cola.

### **Nausea and vomiting**

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause nausea and vomiting or both. Nausea is when you feel sick but do not vomit. For some people, the chemotherapy drugs cause no sickness at all. At what stage you feel sick usually depends on the drug given. Nausea and vomiting can happen before, while getting chemotherapy, straight after, or many hours or days later. It may last for a few hours or, in rare cases, for several days.

Nowadays, there are better treatments to prevent nausea and vomiting. Your doctor can prescribe anti-sickness drugs called anti-emetics. You may need to take these 1 hour before each chemotherapy treatment and for a few days after. They may be given by injection and as tablets to take home afterwards. Do take the tablets, even if you do not feel sick. How long you take them will depend on your type of chemotherapy and how you react to it. If one kind of anti-emetic does not work for you, your doctor can always prescribe another. Also, you may need more than one type of drug to help with nausea. Talk with your doctor or nurse for more advice about this side-effect. It is especially important for you to talk to your doctor or nurse if your nausea is preventing you from eating or drinking enough.



Low doses of steroids can help to reduce nausea and vomiting too. Given in this way, the steroids will not do any lasting harm. They can make you feel better overall and help with any loss of appetite too.

### Loss of appetite

Some chemotherapy drugs can affect your appetite. This may happen for a short time while on treatment. It is best to get advice from a dietitian if this happens. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for a free copy of the booklet, *Diet and Cancer: A Guide for Patients with Cancer*.

## >>> Tips & Hints – nausea and loss of appetite

- Tell your doctor if the anti-sickness tablets are not working.
- Eat bland, easy-to-digest foods and drinks, like cream crackers, toast or plain biscuits.
- Eat about 5 or 6 small meals or snacks each day.
- Do not fill your stomach with fluids before eating.
- Take fluids slowly, with small sips. Ice cubes can help too.
- Try ginger and fizzy drinks, as some people find them helpful.
- Do not eat or prepare food if you feel sick.
- Avoid food and drinks with a strong smell, like garlic, onions, fried foods, etc.
- Eat warm or cool foods if you cannot tolerate the smell of hot food.
- Find out when is best for you to eat and drink before treatment. Some people need a light snack, while others need an empty stomach.



National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700

## >>> Should I eat a special diet?

### Low-sugar diet

There are many myths about cancer and one of them is that 'sugar feeds cancer'. For this reason, some people greatly reduce the amount of sugar in their diet. There is no good reason to do this. It is best to eat a well-balanced diet while on chemotherapy.

If you have diabetes or are taking steroids while on chemotherapy, your blood sugars will be checked regularly. Again you should eat a well-balanced diet, as advised by your dietitian. If there are any changes to your blood sugars, your dietitian will advise you on your diet.

### Special diets

It is best not to experiment with special diets while on chemotherapy. Many of these diets are restrictive, which means that certain food items must be avoided. Restrictive diets can lead to poor appetite and weight loss, fatigue, and other nutritional deficiencies and may be harmful. If you take large doses of vitamins or minerals, it may affect how the chemotherapy works.

Do get advice from your dietitian or call the National Cancer Helpline for a copy of *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*.

### Diarrhoea

Some drugs can harm the cells that line your bowels and cause diarrhoea. Diarrhoea is basically passing bowel motions that are soft, loose or watery more than three times a day. You may also get some cramping or abdominal pain. Diarrhoea can also be caused by infections, long-term constipation or drugs used to treat constipation.

If you have diarrhoea, drink lots of clear fluids to replace the fluid you are losing. Do tell your doctor or nurse if you have diarrhoea for more than 24 hours. There are medicines called anti-diarrhoeals that can stop this side-effect of treatment. Talk to your nurse or doctor before taking anti-diarrhoeals.

### Constipation

Chemotherapy may slow down the movement of your bowels. As a result, your regular bowel habit may change. You may find it painful or hard to pass a bowel motion. Or you may feel bloated or have nausea. This is known as constipation.

If this happens, let your doctor or nurse know as soon as possible. You may need to drink more clear fluids and/or take a laxative. In some cases, your doctor may have to adjust your treatment. Getting some exercise can help to move your bowels too. Enemas and suppositories are not recommended if you are having chemotherapy.

## >>> Tips & Hints – diarrhoea and constipation



### Diarrhoea

- Eat small snacks or meals instead of three large meals a day.
- Have a low-fibre diet. Eat less raw fruit, cereals and vegetables.
- Avoid milk, alcohol or very hot or cold drinks.
- Avoid spicy or fried foods.
- Drink plenty of clear fluids (1½ to 2 litres a day).
- If you have severe diarrhoea, you may become dehydrated and need to be admitted to hospital for intravenous fluids.

### Constipation

- Keep a record of when your bowel opens.
- Eat more fibre, raw fruit, cereals and vegetables.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Prune juice and warm drinks can often help.
- Be as active as you can. Take gentle exercise, like walking or yoga, if possible.

### Mouth, throat and taste problems

Mouth and throat problems due to chemotherapy can include a dry mouth, mouth sores and ulcers, or infections of gums, teeth or tongue. A sore mouth, if it happens, can occur about 3 to 10 days after the drugs are given. Your mouth may be more sensitive to hot or cold food as well. There are many mouthwashes and medications to help, which your doctor can prescribe for you. It does help to clean your teeth often and gently with a soft toothbrush and gentle flossing, especially after meals. You can also use a bland mouthwash of 1 level teaspoon of salt or baking soda (soda bicarbonate) dissolved in half a litre of warm water. Keep your mouth moist by sipping cool water during the day. If your mouth becomes very sore, there are gels, creams or pastes available to ease the soreness.

Changes in taste and smell can also happen. Food may not taste like it used to or taste more salty, bitter, or like chalk or metal. Normal taste will come back after your treatment has ended. Make sure to visit your dentist before your treatment starts or ask your doctor or nurse when is it safe to get dental work. The booklet, *Diet and Cancer: A Guide for Patients with Cancer*, has some helpful advice on how to manage taste changes. Call 1800 200 700 for a copy.

## >>> Tips & Hints – mouth and throat changes

- Clean your teeth and gums or dentures after each meal and at bedtime.
- Brush your teeth with a soft-bristled or child's toothbrush.
- Use a mouthwash regularly if prescribed for you.
- Avoid mouthwashes that have alcohol or toothpaste that stings. Make your own mouthwash with one level teaspoon of baking soda (soda bicarbonate) or salt dissolved in half a litre of warm water.
- Avoid toothpicks.
- Take crushed ice or pineapple to keep your mouth fresh and moist.
- Use a lip balm or Vaseline to keep your lips moist.
- Drink about 1½ litres (3 pints) of fluid a day. This can be water, weak tea, weak coffee, or soft drinks such as apple juice.
- Avoid citrus drinks like lemon, orange or grapefruit.
- Choose foods that are moist, soft and easy to chew or swallow.
- Add gravies and sauces to your food to make it moist and easy to swallow.
- Eat only the foods that you like.
- Avoid foods that can irritate your mouth: alcohol, spices, garlic, onion, vinegar, salty or very sugary foods.
- Use herbs and seasonings to add flavour to your food.
- Marinate your food if you have problems tasting food.
- Do not smoke as tobacco can irritate your mouth and throat.
- Ask your dietitian for more advice about suitable food and drinks.

## Hair loss

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause hair loss or alopecia. This is when all or some of your hair falls out. It can happen anywhere on your body: your head, face, eyelashes and eyebrows, arms, underarm, legs, and pubic area. How much hair falls out depends on the chemotherapy drug given, the amount and your own reaction to it. Before treatment your doctor and nurse will tell you if you are likely to have any hair loss due to treatment.

- **When?** If you lose your hair, it usually starts within 2 or 3 weeks of treatment. Before your hair starts to fall out, you may get tingling or your scalp may feel very sensitive. This is normal and may last a day or so.
- **Will it come back?** Your hair will start to grow again once treatment stops. It may take a few months. When it regrows, it may not feel the same as before. It might have changed colour, texture or style. It might be darker or lighter in colour, thinner or become straight or curly.
- **Any treatments?** In general you cannot prevent hair loss entirely. Depending on your chemotherapy, it may be possible to reduce or delay hair loss by using a 'cold cap'. This is also known as scalp cooling. The treatment reduces blood flowing to your scalp for a short period so less of the drug reaches the scalp. While it can reduce the risk of hair loss, it does not always prevent it. The cold cap only blocks the action of certain drugs as well. It is also not suitable for all patients and not all hospitals offer this kind of treatment. Ask your doctor or nurse if it would be useful for you.
- **Ways to cope?** It is natural to feel upset at the thought of losing your hair. Don't be afraid to talk to your nurse or medical social worker about your feelings. They will help you find ways to cope with your hair loss. Also, talk to your family and friends as they can give you support too. If you have children, it is best that you prepare your children for your hair loss before it happens. Your medical social worker can give you advice on what to say.
- **Wigs?** If you like, you can get a wig or hairpiece when you lose your hair. Or you may prefer to wear a hat, scarf or bandana. If you decide to get a wig, it is better to organise it before your hair falls out. That way you will get a better match to your own hair colour and style. Your medical social worker or nurse can advise you about getting a wig. If your hospital does not have a medical social worker, ask if

they have the name of a wig fitter that you could visit. In some cases it is possible to get financial assistance towards the cost of a wig or hairpiece. If you have a medical card, you will be entitled to an allowance towards the cost of your wig or hairpiece. The amount you can claim will depend on the Health Service Executive (HSE) area in which you live. If you have private health insurance, you may be covered for the cost of a wig too.

>>> If you are likely to lose your hair, ask your doctor or nurse about wigs early on, so that the wig will be as close a match to your normal hair.

- **Other headwear?** You may like to wear a hat or scarf instead when you go out. There are also turbans which can be worn in the house. For more information and advice, call the National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700 for a copy of the factsheet, *Hair Loss and Cancer Treatment*.

## >>> Tips & Hints – your hair



- Get your hair cut short before it falls out or shave your head. The weight of long hair can pull it out faster.
- Brush or comb your hair gently with a soft or baby brush.
- Use gentle hair products.
- Dry your hair by patting it with a soft towel.
- Avoid hairsprays, hair dryers, curling tongs and curlers.
- Use a gentle moisturiser on your scalp if it becomes dry or itchy.
- Avoid hair dyes but, if you must, use a very mild vegetable-based colour. Ask your nurse or hairdresser for more advice.
- Do not perm your hair during chemotherapy or for 3 months afterwards.
- Keep your head warm by wearing a hat, turban, scarf or wig.
- Protect your scalp by covering up or by putting sunscreen on your head when outdoors
- If you lose your eyelashes, wear glasses or sunglasses to protect your eyes from sun and dust when you are outside.

## Fatigue

Fatigue is a common problem with chemotherapy and radiotherapy. This is where you feel tired and weak and rest does not seem to help. It is quite normal and may be caused by the drugs themselves or by your body fighting the disease. Sometimes the tiredness can be mild or extreme. So do try to get plenty of rest and accept help when offered. The tiredness will ease off gradually once the chemotherapy is over. However, some people can still feel tired for a year or more afterwards.

Remember that fatigue can be caused not only by chemotherapy but also anaemia, lack of sleep, having to make regular visits to the doctor or stress, anxiety and depression. If you normally have plenty of energy, you may find it hard and frustrating when feeling tired all the time. Do talk to your doctor if fatigue is a problem for you or if you have difficulty sleeping. A useful booklet called *Coping with Fatigue* is available from the Irish Cancer Society. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for a free copy.

### >>> Tips & Hints – fatigue

- Plan time to rest each day. Make sure to build short naps into your day.
- Try not to get overtired.
- Have a bedtime routine: quiet time or listening to relaxing music, taking a milky drink, going to bed at the same time each night.
- Ask for and accept help from others with housework, shopping, cooking, childcare or at work.
- Take light exercise, such as walking or yoga, to help you get a good night's sleep.
- Some relaxation therapies can help: visualisation, yoga, meditation.
- Keep your energy for the things you like to do most. Have a nap or short rest before you go out somewhere special.



## Skin and nail changes

Because skin and nail cells grow quickly, some chemotherapy drugs can affect them. Your skin may become dry, flaky, red and itchy. It can also be sensitive to sun and sea or chlorine in swimming pools. With chemotherapy, nails grow more slowly. They may become dark, yellow or brittle and cracked. White lines can also appear across them. Sometimes the nails can loosen and fall off. But don't worry about this, as new nails will grow back over time. The skin on your hands and feet can also become red and sore. This is called palmar-plantar syndrome. Do tell your doctor or nurse if your skin or nails are affected or if you notice any changes to the palms of your hands or soles of your feet.

It is best to stay out of the sun during the hottest part of the day. This is normally between 11am and 3pm.

### >>> Tips & Hints – skin and nail changes

- Pat your skin dry with a soft towel after bathing.
- Avoid wet shaving. Use an electric razor.
- Moisturise your skin if it becomes dry or itchy.
- Use only creams and soaps recommended by your doctor and nurse.
- Avoid direct sunlight. Wear a wide-brimmed hat, long-sleeved loose cotton clothing and use a high factor suncream (SPF 30 or higher) to protect your skin.
- Do not use sunbeds.
- Wear nail varnish to disguise white lines.
- Wear gloves when doing the washing-up, cleaning or gardening.
- Report any skin or nail changes to your doctor and nurse.

### Nervous system changes

Some drugs can cause damage to your nervous system. These can vary depending on the organ affected and can include:

- **Nerve changes:** Some drugs can affect your nerve endings. They may cause numbness or a tingling or burning sensation in your hands and feet. You may have a feeling similar to pins and needles. This is known as peripheral neuropathy. You may have trouble picking up objects or buttoning your clothes. This side-effect is usually temporary and goes away after treatment stops. But it may take several months for the numbness to go away completely. Do tell your doctor or nurse if this happens, as you may need medication or some changes to your treatment. For a free copy of our factsheet on peripheral neuropathy, call the helpline on 1800 200 700.
- **Hearing changes:** With some drugs you may be unable to hear high-pitched sounds. Or you may get a constant sound in your ears called tinnitus. As these buzzing or ringing sounds can be very upsetting, do tell your doctor if you develop them. Some new drugs are being developed to help this problem.
- **Balance and co-ordination problems:** You may have problems with your balance that can lead to falls. Or you may become clumsy. Sometimes you may feel dizzy, shake or tremble.
- **Eyesight problems:** You may get problems like dry or watery eyes, or blurry vision. Sometimes wearing contact lenses can make your eyes painful. Ask your doctor or nurse if you can wear contact lenses while getting chemotherapy. Do let him or her know if your vision is worse than usual.
- **Confusion and memory problems:** After a few treatment cycles, some patients may have some mental confusion and short-term memory loss. This is known as 'chemo brain' and can depend on the type of drug(s) given. It can also include a lack of focus and concentration and being unable to organise daily activities. Do let your doctor know if you experience any of these problems. Sometimes it can be helped by relaxation, exercise, steroids or learning techniques to 'retrain' your brain. These activities focus on improving any memory loss and problems with attention, perception, learning and planning (cognitive rehabilitation). Research into new treatments is ongoing.

- **Anxiety and depression:** Some people can feel restless, anxious or develop insomnia and depression due to chemotherapy. Your doctor may prescribe medication to help or advise counselling and relaxation.

If you have any of these nervous system side-effects, let your doctor or nurse know as medication can often ease them. Many of these problems get better within a year of finishing chemotherapy, but some may last the rest of your life. You may find it helpful to talk to a close relative or friend about your feelings and concerns. If this is not possible, ask your doctor to refer you to a counsellor or a psychologist.



### Tips & Hints – hands and feet problems



- Keep your hands and feet as warm as possible.
- Take gentle exercise if possible. Stress balls may help.
- Wear well-fitting shoes with rubber soles to prevent you falling.
- Be careful when handling knives, scissors and other sharp or dangerous objects.
- Be careful when cutting your nails.
- Be careful when using hot water.
- Check the temperature of the bath before stepping in.
- Wear gloves when cooking, cleaning or gardening.
- Keep your skin moisturised and soft.
- Prevent falls. Use a walking stick, walk slowly, use handrails when going upstairs, use non-slip bathmats.

### Other changes

Different drugs cause different side-effects. You may develop a side-effect or symptom not listed here. However, your doctor or nurse will give you information on the possible side-effects of your treatment. If you have any concerns, talk your doctor or nurse for advice.



## To sum up

- When deciding on chemotherapy, your doctor will consider the type of cancer you have, where it is, if it has spread and where, your age, and your general health.
- How often you get chemotherapy will depend on the type of cancer, the drugs used, how the cancer is responding to the drugs and any side-effects you get.
- Each chemotherapy period is called a cycle.
- Your chemotherapy may last from weeks to months.
- Your doctor will explain the benefits and risks of treatment beforehand. You are free to get a second opinion if you wish.
- After a few cycles, your doctor will arrange some tests and exams to see if the chemotherapy is working.
- Side-effects are problems caused by cancer treatment.
- Some common problems are fatigue, nausea, vomiting, lowered blood cell counts, hair loss and mouth sores.

## Will chemotherapy affect my fertility?

Some cancer treatments and sometimes the disease itself can affect your fertility. This means that sadly you may not be able to get pregnant or father a child. This effect may last a short while or for the rest of your life. Your chances of infertility depend on:

- Your age – how near you are to the menopause
- The type of cancer you have – ovarian, womb, prostate, testicular
- The type of chemotherapy given
- Any other treatments used – radiotherapy, hormone therapy
- If you have any other health problems

Before treatment starts, talk to your cancer specialist about your chances of becoming infertile and your options. Bring your partner, so he or she can ask questions too. These days, many cancer treatments are less likely to affect fertility. Many couples have had healthy babies after one or the other has been treated for cancer.

## Will I be able to get pregnant?

Some drugs used to treat cancer can damage your ovaries. As a result, the number of healthy eggs and hormones can be affected. If this happens, you may have difficulty getting pregnant after treatment and in some cases it may be impossible. If there is any chance you could be pregnant before starting treatment, let your doctor know.

- **Short-term infertility:** Your periods may become irregular or stop during treatment or for a few months afterwards. This does not mean you are permanently infertile. You may get hot flushes, a dry vagina or other symptoms of the menopause. But after a few months your periods may return to normal. This happens in about a third of women. The younger you are, the more likely your periods will return to normal and you can get pregnant naturally.
- **Menopause:** Unfortunately, the nearer you are to the menopause, the more likely your periods will stop permanently. This means that your chances of having a child in the future are significantly reduced. Usually it is not possible to stop this happening. But your doctor may prescribe hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to reduce the effects of the menopause, like hot flushes and a dry vagina. HRT replaces the hormones normally made in your ovaries. The treatment can be given as a tablet or through an implant under your skin, by creams or by a slow-release patch worn on your arm or leg.
- **Avoiding pregnancy:** You may not know if you are fertile or not, as your periods may stop during chemotherapy. But it is still possible for you to become pregnant during treatment. Side-effects of chemotherapy like vomiting and diarrhoea can make the contraceptive pill work less well. For this reason, you must use a reliable method of contraception throughout your treatment and for some time afterwards. You should not get pregnant as the drugs can harm your baby, especially in the first 3 months of pregnancy. There can also be a risk of miscarriage.
- **Checking fertility after treatment:** Once treatment is over, there are tests that can check if you are fertile or not. For women, a blood test can tell how well your ovaries are working and for men, your sperm can be tested. Talk to your doctor or nurse who can organise these tests for you. They may also refer you to a fertility specialist.

- **Getting pregnant after treatment:** Generally, doctors believe it is better not to get pregnant for at least 2 years after your chemotherapy ends. This gives you a chance to recover from the effects of treatment. And by this time the likelihood of the disease coming back is much less. But do talk to your cancer specialist about your individual circumstances and what he or she recommends.
- **Support:** It may help to talk to a family member or close friend about your fertility concerns. Ask your doctor or nurse for advice on what to do.

»»» For most women, it is better not to get pregnant for at least 2 years after your chemotherapy ends.

### Freezing your eggs

If there is a risk that your chemotherapy will cause permanent infertility, you have the option of freezing your eggs (oocytes) before treatment begins. Rotunda IVF at the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin provides a service where eggs can be frozen. If you still want to have children, discuss this as early as possible with your cancer specialist before treatment.

- **Who's suitable?** You must be over 18 years of age, be able to give informed consent and be referred to Rotunda IVF by your cancer specialist (oncologist). Not all women are suitable for egg freezing. The type and location of your cancer, your age and medical history can affect your suitability. You will need to have a blood test to check for viruses. For example, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV and cytomegalovirus (CMV). At Rotunda IVF, you will also have the opportunity to receive counselling, and discuss any concerns and worries you may have.
- **What's involved?** On average women produce just one egg every month. This is not enough to offer a woman a realistic chance of getting pregnant in the future. For this reason your ovaries will need to be stimulated to produce several eggs for storage. There are different ways of doing this and your doctor will decide which option is best for you and when you can start. This will sometimes depend on your menstrual cycle.

The aim will be to collect eggs within three weeks. Generally, you will have daily injections and monitoring for about 12 days, followed by a procedure to remove the eggs. There is always a possibility that no eggs develop or that the eggs are not suitable for freezing. But this will be discussed with you at Rotunda IVF. You should be aware that your own health will take priority over egg freezing. If this time period is not possible, due to the urgency of chemotherapy or radiotherapy, egg freezing cannot go ahead.

»»» Your own health will take priority over egg freezing.

If the eggs are successfully collected, they are stored for between 5 and 10 years or until you are 45 years old. It may be possible to extend this period in certain circumstances. The eggs will only be stored while you are alive, so it is important you keep in touch with Rotunda IVF every year. Let them know of any changes in your address or contact details.

- **Cost of egg freezing?** The collection and storage of eggs at Rotunda IVF is currently free for all cancer patients living in Ireland. Before your appointment, do check to confirm that this is still the case.
  - **Trying to conceive?** When the time comes and you feel ready to become pregnant, you should talk to your oncologist. He or she can tell you if it is safe for you to try to get pregnant. You will then need to contact Rotunda IVF to discuss your options. The clinic encourages women to use their frozen eggs by the age of 40. After that age, there is a high chance of complications and you are less likely to have a successful pregnancy.
- When ready, your frozen eggs can be thawed and fertilised in the laboratory. This is done using a form of IVF (in vitro fertilisation) called ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection). The fertilised eggs will then be put into your womb in the hope of a pregnancy. Before this happens, you will be given tablets to build up the lining of your womb.
- **Where?** You can decide to have this treatment at Rotunda IVF. If you decide to be treated elsewhere, it is possible for the frozen eggs to be transferred to a clinic of your choice. However, your clinic must agree to it beforehand and the transfer is done at your own risk.

- **More information?** If you would like more information about egg freezing, talk to your doctor or nurse. You can also call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700. Your GP can give you advice as well.

### Will I be able to father a child?

Many men father healthy babies after treatment for cancer. But some types of cancer and cancer treatment may affect your fertility by lowering your sperm count. Sometimes these effects are short-term and sperm production can recover. In other cases, the effects may be permanent.

In general, doctors recommend that you have a sperm test at least 6 months after treatment to check your fertility. But your cancer doctor will give you advice for your individual circumstances. If you are young and have not yet had children, it is important to talk to your doctor about sperm banking.

- **Avoiding pregnancy:** Your cancer treatment can damage the sperm that you are currently producing and cause birth defects. It is important to use a barrier method of contraception, like condoms, throughout your treatment and for some time afterwards.
- **Support:** It may help to talk to a family member or close friend about your fertility concerns. Ask your doctor or nurse for advice on what to do. You may need counselling if infertility is a problem for you, especially if you have never fathered a child.

»»» Do not get your partner pregnant during treatment and for some time afterwards. The drugs may damage your sperm and cause birth defects.

### Sperm banking

If you are producing sperm, even in low numbers, it may be possible for you to have a sample frozen and stored. This is called cryopreservation. Rotunda IVF at the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin provides a service where these samples can be stored.

- **Who's suitable?** You will first need to be referred to Rotunda IVF by your cancer specialist (oncologist). Also, you must be 16 years or over and be able to give informed consent. Your type of cancer or medical history can affect your suitability. You will need a blood test to check for viruses like hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV and cytomegalovirus (CMV).
- **What's involved?** You will be asked to give a number of sperm samples, normally at Rotunda IVF. You will have the opportunity to freeze between one and three samples. This will depend on the time available and the quality of the sample. Not all sperm are suitable for freezing. A sample will be analysed to see if the sperm can survive the freezing process. If they are suitable, the sperm will be frozen and stored until needed.

The sperm are normally stored for 10 years. But you can write to Rotunda IVF asking to extend this period. Sperm will usually only be stored while you are alive. If you intend to leave the sample(s) to your partner, discuss this with Rotunda IVF on your first visit. It is important that you keep in touch with Rotunda IVF every year, and tell them of any changes in your address or contact details.

You may worry that organising the sperm banking may cause a delay in starting chemotherapy. This is seldom the case as it can be done while tests are being done and waiting for results. However, your own health will take priority over sperm banking. If you need chemotherapy or radiotherapy urgently, your oncologist will make this clear to you from the beginning.

- **Cost of sperm banking?** The service at Rotunda IVF is currently free for all cancer patients living in Ireland. Before your appointment, do check to confirm that this is still the case.
- **Trying to conceive?** When the time comes and you and your partner feel ready to have a child, talk to your oncologist. He or she can tell you if your body has recovered from the effects of chemotherapy. If your sperm have been frozen, you will need to contact Rotunda IVF to discuss your options. The first thing that needs to be checked is your fertility. It is possible that your chemotherapy may not have affected it at all. However, if it is



affected, your frozen sperm can be used. More than likely, you and your partner will be advised to have assisted reproduction techniques. These can involve IVF (in vitro fertilisation) and ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection), which means your sperm will fertilise your partner's eggs in the laboratory. But if you have many sperm samples, artificial insemination may be done instead.

- **Where?** You can decide to have this treatment at Rotunda IVF. If you decide to be treated elsewhere, it is possible for the frozen sperm to be transferred to a clinic of your choice. However, your clinic must agree to it beforehand and the transfer is done at your own risk.
- **More information?** If you would like to find out more about sperm banking, talk to your doctor or nurse. You can also call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for advice in confidence.

### Coping with infertility

It is not easy to hear that your fertility may be affected as a result of cancer. The sense of loss can be painful no matter what age you are. Your reaction can vary from acceptance to shock, sadness and silence to anger and depression. There is also no set time to have these reactions. Indeed the reality may only sink in when treatment is over.

#### Support

It can take a while to sort out your emotions and be able to talk about them. When you are ready, you may find it helpful to talk openly to your partner, your family or a friend about these feelings. If they understand how you feel, it is often easier for them to offer help and support. It is important too to talk to your doctor or nurse. He or she may arrange for you to speak to a trained counsellor or a specialist, if you cannot deal with any strong emotions that you may have.

National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700



### Pregnancy and cancer

Sometimes pregnant women learn that they have cancer. If you become pregnant before your cancer is diagnosed or before your chemotherapy starts, you should discuss all your options with your doctor. To give chemotherapy or not depends on:

- How far into your pregnancy you are
- The type of cancer you have
- If your cancer has spread
- The type of chemotherapy you will be having

If you are in the first 3 months (trimester) of your pregnancy, giving drugs can harm your baby. Depending on your situation, it may be possible to delay starting chemotherapy until later in pregnancy or after your baby is born. In some cases, however, you will not have this choice. For this reason, you will need to talk to your doctor to make sure you know all the risks and options before making any decisions. You can also talk in confidence to the nurses on the National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700. Remember in some cases it is possible to have chemotherapy and deliver a healthy baby too. However, great care must be taken during this time.

### Will chemotherapy affect my sex life?

Chemotherapy may or may not bring changes to your sex life. A lot depends on:

- Your age
- If you have had these problems before
- The type of chemotherapy you are getting
- If you have any other illnesses



If you are worried that chemotherapy will affect your sex life, discuss your concerns with your doctor before treatment. He or she can tell you about any likely side-effects. While it is usually safe to have sex during chemotherapy, do check with your doctor. If your platelet

count is low and there is a risk of bleeding, your doctor may advise you not to have sex until your count is higher.

Do not worry that cancer can be passed on to your partner during sex. This will not happen. But most hospitals advise that males wear condoms to prevent any traces of the drugs passing into semen or vaginal fluids. While the chances of this happening are low, it is better to be safe.

## Physical effects

**Short-term effects:** Tiredness, lack of energy or nausea can sometimes prevent you from having sex. Your desire for sex (libido) may be low too. If you are a man, you might not be able to climax or have an erection. For women, sex may be more uncomfortable due to bladder or vaginal infections, a vaginal discharge or itching.

**Long-term effects:** For women, chemotherapy may damage the ovaries. This can bring on early menopause (see page 40 on infertility). As a result, you may have dryness of the vagina and less interest in sex. Depending on your type of cancer, your doctor may prescribe hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to help. If sex is painful, a cream or ointment can be prescribed. You can also get K-Y® Jelly or other creams and vaginal lubricants such as Replens MD® from your local pharmacy to moisten your vagina.

For some men, chemotherapy can cause changes in hormone levels, reduce blood supply to the penis, or affect the nerves that control the penis. All of these can result in impotence.

## Emotional effects

You may also lose your desire for sex if you are feeling stressed, anxious or depressed. You may be worried about surviving cancer, or about your family or your finances. Your emotions may be turned upside down and you may find it hard to relax. It is normal to feel that way at this time.

If you have had surgery which has changed your body image, you may feel self-conscious or vulnerable being with your partner.

You may be afraid that your partner – or a new one – will be put off by the changes to your body. You may not want anyone to see or touch your body. It can take some time to get used to your new image.

## How long will it last?

Once you get back to your old routine and your energy level improves, your interest in sex should return. But there is no set time for you to be ready to have sex again. It varies from person to person. It may take a while and often depends on how long it takes you to adjust to your illness. Your doctor will give you advice about any long-term effects.

## Contraception

Do not presume that you are infertile while on chemotherapy. You must take good contraceptive precautions at this time. If you become pregnant, the chemotherapy drugs can harm your baby. To prevent this or any possible problems for your partner, your doctor may tell you to use a reliable method of contraception throughout your treatment. Barrier methods like condoms or the cap are usually best. You should continue this for a few months afterwards.

## Talking about your worries

Talking about your feelings to your partner may help ease your anxieties. Even if you do not feel like having sex, you can still enjoy a close and loving relationship with your partner. Don't feel guilty or embarrassed to talk to your doctor or nurse about this matter either. Knowing how sensitive this issue can be, he or she will only be glad to help you. You can also be referred for specialist counselling, if you think that would be helpful.

You can also call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for advice in confidence.

## What follow-up do I need?

Follow-up visits to your specialist are very important. They will allow your doctor to check for signs of recurrence of the cancer, or follow up on any side-effects you still have. Your doctor can also check for signs of new effects that may develop after you have finished treatment.

In rare cases, some types of chemotherapy may cause long-term damage to your heart and lungs. There is also a slight risk of developing a second cancer because of the treatment.

It is better to be aware of these as soon as possible so that effective treatment can be given. If you are between check-ups and you have a symptom or problem that worries you, let your doctor know. Make an appointment to see him or her as early as possible.

## How can I get my life back to normal?

It is possible to have a fairly normal life during treatment. Often the drugs can make you feel better by easing any symptoms of the cancer. You may also get better quickly between the cycles of treatment. This can help you feel in control and do the things you normally like doing.

More than likely you will have a new routine while on chemotherapy. Once treatment finishes, it may take a while to get back to your old routine. You may even find that you miss the regular contact with the people who looked after you during your regular visits to hospital.

Depending on the effects of treatment – surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy – you may have to make some lasting changes to your life. Living a healthy lifestyle can help to reduce your chances of getting health problems in the future.

### Fatigue

Fatigue or tiredness can be the biggest thing that affects your everyday life. In fact, it may be at least a year before your body gets over the effects of treatment and you regain your strength. See page 36 for

more about fatigue. A useful booklet called *Coping with Fatigue* is also available from the Irish Cancer Society. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for a free copy.

»»» It may be at least a year before your body gets over the effects of treatment.

### School or work

- **School or college:** Some students are able to continue with school or college during their treatment. But this can depend on where you are in your studies. If you are still in full-time education, you may need to consider putting your education on hold until your treatment is over. If you are preparing for important exams, it may be too much for you. You may find it hard to concentrate and focus. Instead, spend your time doing something that you enjoy until you are well enough for your studies.
- **Teenagers and school:** If your child is a teenager, usually they can manage to go to school. Sometimes they may not want to go back because they are embarrassed about hair loss or other side-effects of treatment. But mixing with school friends can help to make things normal for your child. Gentle reassurance and counselling can help if it is a problem. Also, discuss your child's illness with the teachers. You will need to know when there are any infections like chickenpox or measles in your child's class. It is best if your child avoids games and PE while on treatment as they may get overtired.
- **Work:** Depending on how you feel and the type of work you do, you may be able to work during treatment. In general, most people do not work while receiving chemotherapy. Discuss the issue with your doctor and employer before treatment. But don't be in a rush to get back to your normal routine with work. Just do as much as you feel comfortable with. If you do work, you may need to take rests during the day or shorten your working day. When you decide to return to work, begin with reduced hours, for example, mornings or afternoons only. Gradually build up your hours until you feel comfortable working a full day.

- **Finances:** If you are worried about your finances and costs of treatment, see page 67 for more about benefits and allowances that you may be entitled to.

### Social activities

Just because you are getting chemotherapy doesn't mean your social life must come to a standstill. But, you may have to cut back on activities and nights out. You may also need to rest before you do go out. Do tell your doctor or nurse if you have a special occasion coming up, like a wedding or holiday. It may be possible to change the time of your treatment to suit you, so you feel as well as possible and enjoy the occasion. Having the odd alcohol drink from time to time will not affect your treatment either but do check with your doctor.

### Travelling abroad

Do tell your cancer specialist if you plan to go on holidays abroad. Also, you should get a letter from him or her giving details of your illness and treatment, in case you get sick abroad. For some holiday destinations you may need vaccines but they can be harmful if you are receiving chemotherapy. These include live vaccines for polio, chickenpox, rubella (German measles), MMR (measles, mumps and rubella), BCG (tuberculosis), yellow fever and typhoid. There are however vaccines which you can have, if needed. Do ask your doctor which vaccines are safe for you. Again, if you go on a sun holiday, you must protect your skin. See page 37 for more about skin care in the sun.

### Insurance

- **Travel insurance:** It is common for people who have or had cancer to have problems getting travel insurance. Sometimes it is hard to get travel insurance while you are having chemotherapy, but once it is over, it is usually less of a problem. Discuss this with your doctor, who can advise you. The Irish Cancer Society also has information on travel companies that can help you. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for the factsheet, *Travel Insurance and Cancer*.

- **Life insurance:** You may want to provide some finances for your family in the future or wish to have a loan or mortgage paid off. Getting life insurance can be hard, if you have or had cancer. But it is not impossible. Call the National Cancer Helpline for advice and for the factsheet, *Life Insurance and Cancer*.

### Quit smoking

Tobacco smoke may be more damaging for your lungs if you have had chemotherapy. If you smoke, you should consider stopping. The HSE Quit Team offers support and assistance for smokers. You can talk to a specially trained counsellor who will help you to prepare a plan and support you during this time. Call the HSE Quit Team on Freephone 1800 201 203 for more information. It is open Monday to Friday from 10am to 8pm, and every Saturday from 10am to 1pm. Some hospitals also have stop-smoking clinics. Ask your doctor or nurse if there is one in your hospital. Also, visit the website [www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie) or freetext QUIT to 50100.

### Feelings and emotions

You may have a variety of emotions and feelings during your treatment and afterwards. One of them may be anxiety about the cancer coming back. For more information see page 57.





## What can I do to feel well?



- **Medication:** Ask your doctor what side-effects you can expect. Take medication as ordered by your doctor, especially for pain, backache or nausea and vomiting.
- **Rest:** Do not fight the tiredness. Get plenty of rest. If you are working, reduce your hours while having treatment.
- **Sleep:** Have a bedtime routine. If you find it hard to sleep at night, tell your doctor or nurse. Your doctor may be able to prescribe some mild sleeping tablets for you.
- **Exercise:** If you are able for physical exercise, do some regularly. Take it easy at first, increasing the amount as you feel stronger.
- **Eating:** Eat small meals and a well-balanced diet, especially fruit and vegetables. Ask for help in preparing your meals. Take plenty of clear fluids such as water or juices. Exercise and cutting out sweets and cakes may help to bring your weight back to normal, if you put on weight during treatment. Do not diet while on treatment unless advised by your dietitian and doctor.
- **Quit smoking:** Seek advice about quitting smoking, if you are a smoker.
- **Protect your skin:** Keep your skin covered up. Protect it by wearing a high factor suncream (SPF 30 or higher). Do not sunbathe for long periods.
- **Talking:** If you are feeling worried and anxious, talk to your close friends or family about your concerns. Ask to see a medical social worker, counsellor or specialist nurse if you prefer. They can help you find ways to cope.
- **Ask for help:** Cut down on unnecessary tasks. Get others to help you around the house, with shopping, cooking and childcare or with travelling to hospital.
- **Complementary therapies:** Some complementary therapies, like relaxation and medication, can boost your morale and give you a sense of well-being. Do ask your doctor or nurse if they can recommend therapies that are safe for you. The Irish Cancer Society also has a useful booklet called *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*. For a free copy call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700, visit a Daffodil Centre or download it from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

## Cancer and complementary therapies

Complementary treatments for cancer are treatments that can be given alongside standard medical treatment. For example, yoga or massage. Some people find them helpful during their illness. In many countries the way cancer is treated depends on the culture and environment in which you live. In Ireland cancer treatments are based on scientific research, which allows the response to treatment, side-effects and the general effect of treatment to be predicted.

You may hear about the following types of treatments or therapies.

### Conventional therapies

Conventional therapies are treatments which doctors use most often to treat people with cancer. These include surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, hormone treatments and biological therapy. They are tried and trusted methods where there is a long history of use. Many of the treatments have been tested in clinical trials.

### Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are treatments that are sometimes given **together with** conventional treatment. They include therapies such as:

- |                  |                     |                |
|------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| ▪ Meditation     | ▪ Reflexology       | ▪ Yoga         |
| ▪ Relaxation     | ▪ Music, art and    | ▪ Acupuncture  |
| ▪ Visualisation  | dance therapy       | ▪ Hypnotherapy |
| ▪ Gentle massage | ▪ Nutrition therapy |                |
| ▪ Aromatherapy   | ▪ Shiatsu           |                |

Many people find that complementary therapies are very helpful in a number of ways. You may feel more positive about yourself and your illness. You may be better able to cope with the physical side-effects of cancer and the distressing emotions that it can often bring. Some therapies like acupuncture can help with nausea and vomiting, while stress management can help with side-effects such as pain, fatigue, anxiety and depression.

Some complementary therapies also focus on the spiritual dimension of a person to aid healing.

## Alternative therapies

Alternative therapies are generally treatments that are used **instead of** conventional treatments. These therapies include diet therapy, megavitamin therapy and herbalism. The diet therapy can often be restrictive. This means it does not allow you to eat foods that could be nutritious for you. Some restrictive diets can harm your health and may even cause malnutrition. Most doctors do not believe that such treatments can cure or control cancer.

## Interactions with chemotherapy

Some herbs, minerals or vitamins can make some chemotherapy drugs work less well. For example, St John's Wort, too much vitamin C and essiac can reduce the effect of chemotherapy drugs. Do talk to your doctor and nurse before taking any complementary therapy.



### If you decide to have complementary or alternative treatments...



Before you decide to change your treatment or add any methods of your own, be sure to talk to your doctor or nurse. Some methods can be safely used along with standard medical treatment. But others can interfere with standard treatment or cause serious side-effects. For that reason, it is important to talk openly with your GP or cancer specialist if you are thinking of having treatment with either a complementary or alternative practitioner. Don't be afraid that your doctor will be offended by your wish for other treatments. In fact, he or she may be able to recommend therapies that could be safe and useful for you.

Be cautious in selecting a practitioner. Don't be misled by promises of cures. At present, this area is not fully regulated in Ireland. Ensure that the practitioners you plan to visit are properly qualified and have a good reputation. Check to see if they belong to a professional body or not. If you are unsure but would like to know what other patients have found helpful, contact your doctor or a patient support group. Also, it is important to make sure that the practitioner is charging a fair price for your treatment.

More information is available in a free booklet from the Irish Cancer Society called *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*. If you would like a copy or more advice, call the National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700.

## Coping and emotions

### How can I cope with my feelings?

There are many reactions when told you have cancer. Reactions can differ from person to person too. In fact, there is no right or wrong way to feel. There is also no set time to have one particular emotion or not. Some reactions may occur at the time of diagnosis, while others might appear or reappear later during your treatment. Or indeed it may not be until you recover from your illness that your emotions hit hard.

It is normal to be upset when told you have cancer.



### Common reactions include:

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear and uncertainty
- Loss of control
- Sorrow and sadness
- Denial
- Anger
- Resentment
- Blame and guilt
- Withdrawal and isolation

Sometimes a cancer diagnosis can bring greater distress and cause anxiety and depression. It may take a long time to come to terms with your emotions. Not only do you have to cope with the knowledge that you have cancer, but also the physical effects of chemotherapy.

If you would like more information or would like to talk in confidence, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

You can also ask for copies of the booklets, *Understanding the Emotional Effects of Cancer* and *Who Can ever Understand? Talking about Your Cancer*.

## How can my family and friends help?

Families and friends can support you through your cancer journey in different ways. Some family members and friends can offer a listening ear and give advice if needed. Others may gather up-to-date information on cancer to know what you can expect and what you are going through. Others again may prefer to help you in a practical way with travelling to and from the hospital, with childcare, cooking, shopping or housework. It may take time to know which way suits you and your family or friends best.



### How to talk to someone with cancer

When someone close to you has cancer it can be hard to know what to do. Their welfare may be a priority for you, but you might still be unsure when to visit or what to talk about. You may be afraid of upsetting them or saying the wrong thing. So it may seem best to pretend that everything is okay and carry on as normal. Sadly, by not talking to your friend or loved one, it can make them feel even more lonely and isolated. Try not to withdraw because you're afraid of their illness or what might happen in the future. Although some people do die from cancer, many do not. Be honest with own your feelings too.



Often those with cancer do not wish to burden their family and friends with their worries and concerns. Gentle encouragement can sometimes help. But don't rush into talking about their illness – knowing that you are always ready to listen and give help may reassure them. You may not think you are doing much by just listening. In fact, it is one of the best ways to help.

Sometimes your friend or relative may get cross or irritable for what may seem to be no good reason. These feelings are completely normal. Be as patient and understanding as you can. Give them the space and time to adjust to the changes in their life. Above all, let them know that you are there, if they want to talk or need help. In time, life will begin to be normal again.

*Lost for Words: How to Talk to Someone with Cancer* is a useful booklet written for relatives and friends of people with cancer and is available from the Irish Cancer Society. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 for a free copy.

## How can I talk to my children?

A cancer diagnosis can affect an entire family. It can bring changes that may be either great or small. Even so, it is best to keep family life as normal as much as possible. Continue with school and other activities, with birthdays and celebrations or work commitments. It may take a while but families can learn to adjust to changes in their lives.

Every family deals with cancer in a different way. You may feel that you do not want your illness to upset family life, or feel guilty that you cannot do activities with your children or grandchildren or that you're letting them down. These are all natural feelings to have at this time.

### Be honest

The main thing to remember is that being honest with your family really helps. Keeping your illness a secret may not be the best thing for your children. It can put added pressures on your family and lead to confusion. Children are very sensitive to stress and tension and if you try to protect them by saying nothing, they may feel isolated. In fact, they may have greater fears if told nothing.

It is best that you or your partner tell your children about your cancer diagnosis. If this is not possible, then someone else close to your children should break the news.

How much you tell children will depend on their age and level of maturity. Very young children do not understand illness and need a simple reason why their parent or friend is sick and has to go to hospital regularly. A story about good cells and bad cells usually works well. Most children over 10 years of age can take in fairly full explanations of why you are sick. Adolescents can understand far more. Talk to children in language they will understand but without going into the details of your illness.

It is best to prepare children for what to expect from the side-effects of treatments and to answer their questions simply and honestly.

For example, it is a good idea to tell your children your hair will fall out before it actually happens. It is also important not to force your children to talk about your illness. If they rebel or turn quiet, it may be their way of showing their feelings.

### Coping with children's emotions

During your illness, your children may experience a range of emotions from fear, guilt, anger to neglect, loneliness, isolation and embarrassment. They need to be reassured that your illness is not their fault. Whether they show it or not, children may feel that they somehow are to blame. But by having an open honest approach, it may bring you a sense of relief. Your family may also find new depths of love and inner strength that will boost your life together.

If you need some extra help in dealing with children, talk to your nurse or medical social worker. A useful booklet called *Talking to Children about Cancer: A Guide for Parents* gives practical advice for talking to children about cancer. If you would like a copy, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700. Another helpful book for children is *The Secret C: Straight Talking about Cancer*. See page 80 for more details.



### What else can I do?

Everyone experiences cancer in a different way. And how each person copes with cancer varies too. There is no right or wrong way to cope, only your way. During your illness there are many things that you can learn, not only about cancer itself but also about you as a person. Here is a list of things to help make you feel more involved and more in control of your illness. They can help to boost your self-esteem and well-being, making it easier to deal with cancer.

- **Communicate with your family and close friends:** Do not keep your worries or symptoms secret from the people closest to you. This includes physical or emotional problems. Ask the person closest to you to come with you when visiting the doctor and when treatments will be discussed.

- **Live one day at a time:** Don't think about the future too much. Concentrate on the present and getting through each day of tests or treatment. That way, you may find it easier to cope with your illness.
- **Live well:** Try to eat as well as you can. Eat little and often, including lots of different types of foods with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Do some regular exercise that you enjoy. Take it easy at first, building up the amount you do, as you feel stronger.
- **Expect change in your life:** Even though you may want to stick to your old routines, sometimes this may not be possible. It may take a while to adjust to your new routine but keep an open mind. Change may bring new opportunities and blessings.
- **Keep an open mind:** Don't feel you have to be positive all the time. Expect ups and downs during your cancer journey. There will be times when you feel low but don't feel guilty about it, as it will pass.
- **Seek information:** Be sure to ask your doctor as many questions as you can and get involved in decisions about your treatment. Always ask for information that is personal to you. Ask what side-effects you can expect so you can prepare for them. Build up as much information about your cancer and treatment as possible. Follow your doctor's instructions carefully. Take your medication. If you forget and are not sure what to do, ask your doctor. Keep a notebook of all your dates for blood tests, X-rays, scans, treatments, symptoms, side-effects, medications, and your general health. Keep a record of any emotions you are feeling too, especially strong ones. Call 1800 200 700 for a free copy of the *Journey Journal* to help you keep track of your cancer treatment.
- **Find what works for you:** It can help to use whatever way of coping that has helped you solve problems in the past. Some people are comfortable taking about their illness, others are not. You may prefer relaxation, meditation, walking, listening to music, or other approaches helpful. Do whatever suits you. But if it's not working, be open to finding a new way to cope.



- **Build a support network:** Be realistic about what you can manage by yourself. Seek help from those who want to support you. Talk to your family, friends, nurses or doctors. Meet with other patients in support groups and self-help groups as they can understand what you are going through. If the group does not suit you and is not helping, leave it.
- **Seek professional help:** If you have any low moods or strong emotions talk to your close friends and family – or someone who is a good listener. If they are still getting the better of you, discuss them with your nurse and doctor. They may recommend you talk to a trained counsellor or other specialist.
- **Spiritual care:** When faced with a cancer diagnosis and treatment, you may start thinking about the meaning of life and the afterlife. Sometimes spiritual and religious beliefs can bring comfort and hope. Prayer or meditation can help you focus on what has value and meaning in your life. Even if you don't consider yourself a religious or spiritual person, it is still possible to get support from prayer or meditation. Some complementary therapies that have a spiritual dimension might also help you focus on being positive and hopeful.
- **Express yourself:** Keep a diary or journal if you need to express yourself without holding back. It can help you make sense of your cancer journey and can bring great healing and relief. Other forms of creative expression, such as music and art may help too.



## Support resources

### Who else can help?

There are many people ready to help you and your family throughout treatment and afterwards.



- Medical social worker
- Cancer nurse specialists
- Psycho-oncology services
- Family doctor (GP)
- Community health services
- Support groups
- Irish Cancer Society



**Medical social worker:** The medical social worker in your hospital can help in many ways. He or she can give support and counselling to you and your family and give advice on practical and financial supports and services available when you go home.

**Cancer nurse specialists:** Some of the major cancer treatment hospitals have oncology liaison nurses and/or cancer nurse coordinators. These specially trained nurses can support you and your family from the time of diagnosis and throughout treatment. These nurses work along with other members of your medical team to meet your needs.

**Psycho-oncology services:** In some larger hospitals there are special units that provide psycho-oncology services. This means that you can receive psychological care and support during your diagnosis, treatment and recovery by a team of experts. Usually the team consists of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and nurses working closely together.

**Family doctor (GP):** You may feel comfortable talking to your family doctor (GP) about your cancer too. He or she can discuss any of your queries and offer advice and support.

**Community health services:** There are various community health services available from your local health centre. These centres have public health nurses (who can visit you at home), welfare officers and home-help organisers. If you live far from your hospital, your community welfare officer can also help with practical issues such as

financial problems or exceptional needs. More information on the services is available either from the medical social worker in the hospital before you go home or at your local health centre.

**Support groups:** Joining a support group can put you in touch with people who have been in a similar situation. They can give you practical advice about living with cancer. Cancer support centres and groups are found in most counties in Ireland and can offer a wide range of services. Some are listed at the back of this booklet. You can also search for a support group on [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

**Irish Cancer Society:** The staff of the Cancer Information Service will be happy to discuss any concerns you or your family may have, at any stage of your illness. This can range from treatment information or practical advice about your financial matters. Call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre for information about any of the services outlined above or for support services in your area.



## Health cover

Health cover falls into two categories – cover for medical card holders and cover for all other categories. Details of the following are given here:

- Hospital cover
- GP visit card
- Benefits and allowances
- Outpatient cover
- Drug Payments Scheme (DPS)
- Medical card
- Private healthcare cover

At the end of this section there are also some useful telephone numbers and addresses for further help.

### Hospital cover

At present, everyone is entitled to hospital inpatient services in a public ward in a public hospital. There is a €75 a night charge up to a limit of €750 in 1 year. These charges do not apply to medical card holders. Higher rates apply for semi-private or private care.

### Outpatient cover

If you go to the accident and emergency department of a public hospital without being referred there by a GP, you will be charged €100. There is no charge if you have a medical card or are admitted to hospital because of attending the accident and emergency department first.

The €100 charge applies to the first visit in relation to an illness or accident. If you have to return for further visits to an outpatient clinic in relation to the same illness or accident, you should not have to pay the charge again.

### Medical card

A medical card usually allows you, your spouse and any child under 16 to free GP services, prescribed drugs and medicines, inpatient public hospital services as well as outpatient services and medical appliances. You will have to pay a prescription charge of €2.50 per item up to a limit of €25 per family per month.

To qualify for a medical card depends on a means test regardless of age. If you are over 70 and your weekly income is €500 or less (€900 for couples), you can still apply for a card. Financial guidelines are set out each year and are available from your local Health Service Executive (HSE) office. If your means are above but close to the guidelines, you should apply for a card anyway as a card may be granted in some situations. For example, if you have a large amount of medical expenses. This is known as a discretionary medical card.

If you wish to apply for a medical card, you can download an application form and apply online ([www.medicalcard.ie](http://www.medicalcard.ie)) or at your local health centre. LoCall 1890 252 919.

### GP visit card

If you do not qualify for a full medical card, you may be eligible for a GP visit card. This card covers visits to your doctor only and you will have to pay for drugs, outpatient/inpatient charges and medical appliances yourself. It is means tested but will take into account your after-tax income and certain expenses like childcare, rent/mortgage and travel to work. Check with the medical social worker at the hospital or your HSE office to see if you are eligible. If you wish to apply for a GP visit card, you can download an application form and apply online ([www.medicalcard.ie](http://www.medicalcard.ie)) or at your local health centre. LoCall 1890 252 919.

### Drugs Payment Scheme

Under the Drugs Payment Scheme (DPS), individuals and families, including spouses and dependent children, pay a limit of €144 each month to cover the cost of prescribed drugs, medicines and appliances. You can apply for cover under the scheme by contacting your local HSE office or your local pharmacy.

### Private healthcare cover

Private health insurance is used to pay for private care in hospital or from various specialists in hospitals or in their practices. In Ireland, this is available through the VHI, Laya Healthcare, AVIVA Health, GloHealth, and other schemes. They provide cover for day

care/inpatient treatment and hospital outpatient treatment. Before attending hospital, it is best to check the level of cover provided by your insurance company, both for inpatient and outpatient services.

If you have private insurance, you may not always be able to have your tests done as quickly as you would like. Your health insurer has to approve some tests in advance. For example, MRI and PET scans. In some cases, it may take 24–48 hours to get approval from your health insurer.

### Benefits and allowances

You or a family member may qualify for a number of benefits and allowances. For example: Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Carer's Leave.

More information on these is available in a booklet called *Managing the Financial Impact of Cancer: A Guide for Patients and Their Families*. For a free copy, contact the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can also download it from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)



Application forms for the benefits are available from social welfare offices or the Social Welfare Services Office, Government Buildings, Ballinalee Road, Longford. Tel: (043) 334 0000 or LoCall 1890 927 770. You can also download the forms from websites such as [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie) or [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)

### Appliances

If you have a medical card most appliances such as wigs and prostheses are free of charge or subsidised. The subsidy will depend on the HSE area. For further information, contact your local HSE office.

### Travel to hospital

You may be faced with many expenses including travelling to and from hospital. If your travel costs are very expensive, discuss it with your medical social worker at the hospital. Limited help may also be

available from your community welfare officer. Some HSE areas provide transport services to hospitals for outpatient appointments and day centres, usually for patients with medical cards.

See pages 72 and 73 for information on the Travel2Care and Care to Drive schemes run by the Irish Cancer Society. Some local communities may also provide volunteer transport services.

### Further information

Depending on your circumstances at the time of your illness, there are many other benefits and entitlements that may be relevant to you. Always have your PPS number to hand when you are enquiring about entitlements and benefits. The most direct way to check your eligibility is to contact:

- Your community welfare officer in your local health centre
- The medical social worker in the hospital you are attending

#### For social welfare queries, contact:

##### Dept of Social Protection – Information Service

Oisín House  
212–213 Pearse Street  
Dublin 2

Tel: 1850 662 244  
Leaflet line: 1890 202 325  
Email: [info@welfare.ie](mailto:info@welfare.ie)  
Website: [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)

For queries about local health and social services, contact the HSE.  
**HSE infoline:** 1850 24 1850 **Email:** [info@hse.ie](mailto:info@hse.ie) **Website:** [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

Information is also available from your local Citizens Information Centre. A list of these centres is available from:

#### Citizens Information

**Tel:** 0761 07 4000 **Email:** [information@citizensinformation.ie](mailto:information@citizensinformation.ie)  
**Website:** [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)

National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700



### If you have financial worries...



A diagnosis of cancer can sometimes bring the added burden of financial worries. You may find that you have a lot more expenses as well as your normal outgoings, such as medication, travel, food, heating, laundry, clothing and childcare costs. If you are unable to work or unemployed, this may cause even more stress. It may be hard for you to recover from cancer if you are worried about providing for your family and keeping a roof over your head.

There is help available if you find it hard to cope with all these expenses. Contact your medical social worker in the hospital or your local health centre for advice. The Irish Cancer Society can also in certain cases give some assistance towards travel costs and other expenses because of your illness. See page 72 for more details. You can also call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre and the nurse will suggest ways to help you manage.

If you feel you are getting into debt or are in debt, there is help available. Contact the Money Advice and Budgeting Service on the MABS Helpline 0761 07 2000. This service can help you work through any financial issues you have. They can assess your situation, work out your budget, help you deal with your debts and manage your payments. See page 73 for contact details. A useful book for preparing low-budget nutritious meals is *101+ Square Meals*. See page 80 for more information.

### Irish Cancer Society Services

The Irish Cancer Society funds a range of cancer support services that provide care and support for people with cancer at home and in hospital.

- Cancer Information Service (CIS)
- Daffodil Centres
- Cancer support services
- Survivors Supporting Survivors
- Counselling
- Night nursing
- Cancer information booklets and factsheets
- Financial support
- Care to Drive transport project

## Cancer Information Service (CIS)

The Society provides a Cancer Information Service with a wide range of services. The **National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700** is a freefone service that gives confidential information, support and guidance to people concerned about cancer. It is staffed by specialist cancer nurses who have access to the most up-to-date facts on cancer-related issues.

These include prevention of cancer, risk factors, screening, dealing with a cancer diagnosis, different treatments, counselling and other support services. The Helpline can also put you in contact with the various support groups that are available. The Helpline is open Monday to Thursday from 9am to 7pm, and every Friday from 9am to 5pm.

- The website **www.cancer.ie** provides information on all aspects of cancer.
- All queries or concerns about cancer can be emailed to the CIS at **helpline@irishcancer.ie**
- **Message Board** is a discussion space on our website (**www.cancer.ie**) to share your stories, ideas and advice with others.
- The **walk-in caller service** allows anyone with concerns about cancer to freely visit the Society to discuss them in private.
- Find us on **Facebook** and follow us on **Twitter** (@IrishCancerSoc).

## Daffodil Centres

Daffodil Centres are located in a number of Irish hospitals. These have been set up by the Irish Cancer Society in partnership with each hospital and are an extension of the Cancer Information Service. They are generally found near the main entrance of the hospital and are open during the day. Staffed by a specialist nurse and trained volunteers, they provide a range of information, advice, help and support on all aspects of cancer, free of charge.

Daffodil Centres give you a chance to talk in confidence and be listened to and heard. If you are concerned about cancer, diagnosed with cancer or caring for someone with cancer, you are welcome to visit the centre. Do check to see if there is a Daffodil Centre in your hospital.

## Cancer support services

The Irish Cancer Society funds a range of services set up to support you and your family at time of diagnosis, throughout treatment and afterwards. See pages 74–78 for more details.

## Survivors Supporting Survivors

Being diagnosed with cancer can be one of the hardest situations to face in your lifetime. Survivors Supporting Survivors is a one-to-one support programme run by the Irish Cancer Society. It provides peer support to people who have been diagnosed with cancer. All of the volunteers have had a cancer diagnosis and have been carefully selected and trained to give you support, practical information and reassurance when you need it most. You can speak to someone who really knows what you are going through. If you would like to make contact with a volunteer, please call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.

## Counselling

Coping with a diagnosis of cancer can be very stressful at times. Sometimes it can be hard for you and your family to come to terms with your illness. You might also find it difficult to talk to a close friend or relative. In this case, counselling can give you emotional support in a safe and confidential environment. Call the Helpline on 1800 200 700 to find out about counselling services provided by the Irish Cancer Society and services available in your area.

## Night nursing

The Society can provide a night nurse, free of charge, for up to 10 nights if you need end-of-life care at home. The night nurse can also give practical support and reassurance to your family. You can find out more about this service from your GP, local public health nurse, a member of the homecare team or the palliative care services at the hospital. Homecare nurses can offer advice on pain control and managing other symptoms.

## Cancer information booklets and factsheets

Our booklets provide information on all aspects of cancer and its treatment, while our factsheets deal with very specific topics. The booklets also offer practical advice on learning how to cope with your illness. The booklets and factsheets are available free of charge from the Irish Cancer Society by calling 1800 200 700. They can also be downloaded from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) or picked up at a Daffodil Centre.



## Financial support

A diagnosis of cancer can bring with it the added burden of financial worries. In certain circumstances the Irish Cancer Society may be able to provide limited financial help to patients in need through schemes such as Travel2Care and Financial Aid.

**Travel2Care:** Travel2Care can help with your travel costs if you have genuine financial hardship due to travelling over 50 kilometres to a rapid access diagnostic clinic for tests or to a designated cancer centre or approved satellite centre for cancer treatment. The scheme is funded by the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) and managed by the Irish Cancer Society. Travel2Care can help with some of the costs of public transport, such as trains or buses, private transport costs, or petrol expenses.

If this applies to you, contact the medical social work department in your hospital or speak to your cancer care nurse. You can also contact the Irish Cancer Society on (01) 231 6643 / 231 6619 or email: [travel2care@irishcancer.ie](mailto:travel2care@irishcancer.ie)

**Financial Aid:** A special fund has been created to help families experiencing financial difficulty as a result of cancer. If this applies to you, contact the medical social work department in your hospital. You can also speak to your cancer care nurse or contact the Irish Cancer Society at (01) 231 6619.

## Care to Drive transport project

Care to Drive is a scheme operated by the Irish Cancer Society. It provides free transport for patients to and from their treatments using volunteer drivers. All of the volunteers are carefully selected, vetted and trained. You are collected from your home, driven to your appointment and brought back home again. Call (01) 231 0522 to find out if Care to Drive is available in your hospital.



If you would like more information on any of the above services, call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

## Useful organisations

**Irish Cancer Society**  
43/45 Northumberland Road  
Dublin 4  
Tel: 01 231 0500  
National Cancer Helpline:  
1800 200 700  
Email: [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie)  
Website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

**The Carers Association**  
Market Square  
Tullamore  
Co Offaly  
Freefone: 1800 240 724  
Email: [info@carersireland.com](mailto:info@carersireland.com)

**Citizens Information**  
Tel: 0761 07 4000  
Email: [information@citizensinformation.ie](mailto:information@citizensinformation.ie)  
Website: [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)

**Get Ireland Active: Promoting Physical Activity in Ireland**  
Website: [www.getirelandactive.ie](http://www.getirelandactive.ie)

**Health Promotion HSE**  
Website: [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)

**All Ireland Co-operative Oncology Research Group**  
Website: [www.icorg.ie](http://www.icorg.ie)

**Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute**  
Ashgrove House  
Kill Avenue  
Dún Laoghaire  
Co Dublin  
Tel: 01 280 4839  
Email: [info@indi.ie](mailto:info@indi.ie)  
Website: [www.indi.ie](http://www.indi.ie)

**Irish Oncology and Haematology Social Workers Group**  
Website: <http://socialworkandcancer.com>

**Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)**  
Commercial House  
Westend Commercial Village  
Blanchardstown  
Dublin 15  
Tel: 01 812 9350  
Helpline 0761 07 2000  
Email: [helpline@mabs.ie](mailto:helpline@mabs.ie)  
Website: [www.mabs.ie](http://www.mabs.ie)

**Rotunda IVF**

Rotunda Hospital  
Parnell Square  
Dublin 1  
Tel: 01 807 2732  
Email: [info@rotundaivf.ie](mailto:info@rotundaivf.ie)  
Website: [www.rotundaivf.ie](http://www.rotundaivf.ie)

**Health insurers****AVIVA Health**

PO Box 764  
Togher  
Cork  
Tel: 1850 717 177  
Email: [info@avivahealth.ie](mailto:info@avivahealth.ie)  
Website: [www.avivahealth.ie](http://www.avivahealth.ie)

**GloHealth**

PO Box 12218  
Dublin 18  
Tel: 1890 781 781  
Email: [findoutmore@glohealth.ie](mailto:findoutmore@glohealth.ie)  
Website: [www.glohealth.ie](http://www.glohealth.ie)

**Laya Healthcare**

Eastgate Road  
Eastgate Business Park  
Little Island  
Co Cork  
Tel: 021 202 2000  
LoCall: 1890 700 890  
Email: [info@layahealthcare.ie](mailto:info@layahealthcare.ie)  
Website: [www.layahealthcare.ie](http://www.layahealthcare.ie)

**Voluntary Health Insurance (VHI)**

IDA Business Park  
Purcellsinch  
Dublin Road  
Kilkenny  
CallSave: 1850 44 44 44  
Email: [info@vhi.ie](mailto:info@vhi.ie)  
Website: [www.vhi.ie](http://www.vhi.ie)

**National support services****Survivors Supporting Survivors**

Irish Cancer Society  
43/45 Northumberland Road  
Dublin 4  
National Cancer Helpline:  
1800 200 700  
Email: [support@irishcancer.ie](mailto:support@irishcancer.ie)  
Website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

**ARC Cancer Support Centres Dublin**

[See page 75]

**Brain Tumour Support Group**

Medical Social Work Department  
St Luke's Hospital  
Highfield Road  
Rathgar  
Dublin 6  
Tel: 01 406 5295

**Canteen Ireland**

[Teenage cancer support]  
Carmichael Centre  
North Brunswick Street  
Dublin 7  
Tel: 01 872 2012  
Email: [info@canteen.ie](mailto:info@canteen.ie)  
Website: [www.canteen.ie](http://www.canteen.ie)

**Cancer Support Sanctuary LARCC**

[See page 76]

**Connaught support services****Athenry Cancer Care**

Social Service Centre  
New Line  
Athenry  
Co Galway  
Tel: 087 412 8080 / 091 844 319  
Email: [athenrycancercare@gmail.com](mailto:athenrycancercare@gmail.com)  
Website: [www.athenrycancercare.com](http://www.athenrycancercare.com)

**Cara Iorrais Cancer Support Centre**

2 Church Street  
Belmullet  
Co Mayo  
Tel: 097 20590 / 087 391 8573  
Email: [caraiorrais@gmail.com](mailto:caraiorrais@gmail.com)

**East Galway & Midlands Cancer Support**

Cluain Mhuire  
Brackernagh  
Ballinasloe  
Co Galway  
Tel: 090 964 2088 / 087 984 0304  
Email: [info@egmcancersupport.com](mailto:info@egmcancersupport.com)  
Website:  
[www.eastgalwaycancersupport.com](http://www.eastgalwaycancersupport.com)

**Gort Cancer Support Group**

Garrabeg  
Gort  
Co Galway  
Tel: 091 648 606 / 086 172 4500  
Email: [info@gortcancersupport.ie](mailto:info@gortcancersupport.ie)  
Website: [www.gortcancersupport.ie](http://www.gortcancersupport.ie)

**Hand in Hand**

[Children's Cancer Support Centre]  
Main Street  
Oranmore  
Co Galway  
Tel: 091 799 759  
Email: [info@handinhand.ie](mailto:info@handinhand.ie)  
Website: [www.handinhand.ie](http://www.handinhand.ie)

**Mayo Cancer Support Association**

Rock Rose House  
32 St Patrick's Avenue  
Castlebar  
Co Mayo  
Tel: 094 903 8407  
Email: [info@mayocancer.ie](mailto:info@mayocancer.ie)  
Website: [www.mayocancer.ie](http://www.mayocancer.ie)

**Roscommon Cancer Support Group**

Vita House Family Centre  
Abbey Street  
Roscommon  
Tel: 090 662 5898  
Email: [info@vitahouse.org](mailto:info@vitahouse.org)

**Sligo Cancer Support Centre**

44 Wine Street  
Sligo  
Tel: 071 917 0399  
Email: [scsc@eircom.net](mailto:scsc@eircom.net)  
Website: [www.sligocancersupportcentre.ie](http://www.sligocancersupportcentre.ie)

**Tuam Cancer Care Centre**

Cricket Court  
Dunmore Road  
Tuam  
Co Galway  
Tel: 093 28522  
Email: [support@tuamcancercare.ie](mailto:support@tuamcancercare.ie)  
Website: [www.tuamcancercare.ie](http://www.tuamcancercare.ie)

**Leinster support services****Aoibheann's Pink Tie**

[Supporting children with cancer]  
Unit 22, Docklands Innovation Centre  
128-130 East Wall Road  
Dublin 3  
Tel: 01 240 1300  
Email: [lindaconnell@aoibheannspinktie.ie](mailto:lindaconnell@aoibheannspinktie.ie)  
Website: [www.aoibheannspinktie.ie](http://www.aoibheannspinktie.ie)

**ARC Cancer Support Centre**

ARC House  
65 Eccles Street  
Dublin 7  
Tel: 01 830 7333  
Email: [info@arccancersupport.ie](mailto:info@arccancersupport.ie)  
Website: [www.arccancersupport.ie](http://www.arccancersupport.ie)

**ARC Cancer Support Centre**

ARC House  
559 South Circular Road  
Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 707 8880  
Email: [info@arccancersupport.ie](mailto:info@arccancersupport.ie)  
Website: [www.arccancersupport.ie](http://www.arccancersupport.ie)

**Arklow Cancer Support Group**

25 Kings Hill  
Arklow  
Co Wicklow  
Tel: 0402 23590 / 085 110 0066  
Email: [info@arklowcancersupport.com](mailto:info@arklowcancersupport.com)  
Website: [www.arklowcancersupport.com](http://www.arklowcancersupport.com)

**Balbriggan Cancer Support Group**

Unit 23, Balbriggan Business Park  
Harry Reynold's Road  
Balbriggan  
Co Dublin  
Tel: 087 353 2872 / 086 164 2234

**Cancer Support Sanctuary LARCC**

Coole Road  
Multyfarnham  
Mullingar  
Co Westmeath  
Tel: 044 937 1971  
CallSave: 1850 719 719  
Email: info@cancersupport.ie  
Website: www.cancersupport.ie

**Cara Cancer Support Centre**

7 Williamson's Place  
Dundalk  
Co Louth  
Tel: 042 937 4905  
Mobile: 087 395 5335  
Email: info@ccscdundalk.ie  
Website: ccscdundalk.ie

**Cois Nore Cancer Support Centre**

8 Walkin Street  
Kilkenny  
Tel: 056 775 2222  
Email: coisnorekilkenny@gmail.com  
Website: www.kilkennycancersupport.ie

**Cuisle Cancer Support Centre**

Block Road  
Portlaoise  
Co Laois  
Tel: 057 868 1492  
Email: cuislecentre@eircom.net  
Website: www.cuislecentre.com

**Dóchas: Offaly Cancer Support Group**

Teach Dóchas  
Offaly Street  
Tullamore  
Co Offaly  
Tel: 057 932 8268  
Email: info@dochasoffaly.ie  
Website: www.dochasoffaly.ie

**Dublin West Cancer Support Group**

Generic Social Work Department  
Oak Unit, Cherry Orchard Hospital  
Ballyfermot  
Dublin 10  
Tel: 01 620 6273  
Email: martina.mcgovern2@hse.ie/  
noreen.obrien4@hse.ie

**Éist Carlow Cancer Support Centre**

The Waterfront  
Mill Lane  
Carlow  
Tel: 059 913 9684  
Mobile: 085 144 0510  
Email: info@eistcarlowcancersupport.ie  
Website: www.eistcarlowcancersupport.ie

**Gary Kelly Cancer Support Centre**

George's Street  
Drogheda  
Co Louth  
Tel: 041 980 5100  
Email: info@gkcancersupport.com  
Website: www.gkcancersupport.com

**Greystones Cancer Support**

La Touche Place  
Greystones  
Co Wicklow  
Tel: 01 287 1601  
Email: info@greystonescancersupport.com  
Website: www.greystonescancersupport.com

**Hope Cancer Support Centre**

22 Weafer Street  
Enniscorthy  
Co Wexford  
Tel: 053 923 8555  
Email: info@hopesupportcentre.ie  
Website: www.hopesupportcentre.ie

**Midlands Myeloma Support Group**

Teach Dóchas  
Offaly Street  
Tullamore  
Co Offaly  
Tel: 057 932 8268  
Email: info@dochasoffaly.ie

**Rathdrum Cancer Support Group**

St Anne's  
Lower Street  
Rathdrum  
Co Wicklow  
Tel: 087 925 3915  
Email: rathcan@gmail.com

**Tallaght Cancer Support Group**

Trustus House  
1-2 Main Street  
Tallaght  
Dublin 24  
Tel: 086 400 2736  
Email: ctallaght@yahoo.ie  
Website: tallaghtcancersupport.com

**Wicklow Cancer Support Centre**

Rear of Butler's Medical Hall  
Abbey Street  
Wicklow  
Tel: 0404 32696  
Email: wicklowcancersupport@gmail.com

**Munster support services****Cancer Information & Support Centre**

University Hospital Limerick  
Dooradoyle  
Co Limerick  
Tel: 061 485 163  
Website: www.midwesterncancercentre.ie

**CARE Cancer Support Centre**

14 Wellington Street  
Clonmel  
Co Tipperary  
Tel: 052 618 2667  
Email: caresupport@eircom.net  
Website: www.cancercare.ie

**Cork ARC Cancer Support House**

Cliffdale  
5 O'Donovan Rossa Road  
Cork  
Tel: 021 427 6688  
Email: info@corkcancersupport.ie  
Website: www.corkcancersupport.ie

**Cuan House Cancer Support Centre**

24 Gort Aoibhinn  
Cork Hill  
Youghal  
Co Cork  
Tel: 024 92353

**Kerry Cancer Support Group**

Acorn Centre  
124 Tralee Townhouse Apartments  
Maine Street  
Tralee  
Co Kerry  
Tel: 066 719 5560 / 087 230 8734  
Email: kerrycancersupportgroup@eircom.net  
Website: www.kerrycancersupport.com

**Recovery Haven**

5 Haig's Terrace  
Tralee  
Co Kerry  
Tel: 066 719 2122  
Email: recoveryhaven@gmail.com  
Website: www.recoveryhavenkerry.com

**Solas Centre**

South Eastern Cancer Foundation  
Williamstown  
Waterford  
Tel: 051 304 604  
Email: info@solascentre.ie  
Website: www.solascentre.ie

**Suaimhneas Cancer Support Centre**

2 Clonaslee  
Gortland Roe  
Nenagh  
Co Tipperary  
Tel: 067 37403  
Email: suaimhneascancersupport@eircom.net

**Suir Haven Cancer Support Centre**

Clongour Road  
Thurles  
Co Tipperary  
Tel: 0504 21197  
Email: suirhaven@gmail.com



## Ulster support services

### Coiste Scaoil Saor Ó Ailse

C/O Ionad Niomh Padraig  
Upper Dore  
Bunbeg  
Letterkenny  
Co Donegal  
Tel: 074 953 2949  
Email: ionadnp@eircom.net  
Website: www.scaoilsaor.ie

### Crocus: Monaghan Cancer Support Centre

The Wellness Centre  
19 The Grange  
Plantation Walk  
Monaghan  
Tel: 087 368 0965 / 047 62565  
Email: crocus.2011@yahoo.com

### Cuan Cancer Social Support and Wellness Group

2nd Floor, Cootehill Credit Union  
22–24 Market Street  
Cootehill  
Co Cavan  
Tel: 086 455 6632

## Other support services

### The Bella Rose Foundation

Merry Maid House  
West Park Campus  
Garter's Lane  
Citywest  
Dublin 24  
Tel: 087 320 3201  
Email: thebellarosefoundation@gmail.com  
Website: www.bellarose.ie

### Ballinasloe Cancer Support Centre

Main Street  
Ballinasloe  
Co Galway  
Tel: 090 964 3431  
Email: ballinasloecancer@yahoo.co.uk

### Cancer Care West

72 Seamus Quirke Road  
Galway  
Tel: 091 545 000  
Email: info@cancercareswest.ie  
Website: www.cancercareswest.ie

### Cúnamh: Bons Secours Cancer Support Group

Bon Secours Hospital  
College Road  
Cork  
Tel: 021 480 1676  
Website: www.cunamh.ie

### Dundalk Cancer Support Group

Philipstown  
Hackballscross  
Dundalk  
Co Louth  
Tel: 086 107 4257

### The Forge Cancer Support Service

The Forge Family Resource Centre  
Pettigo  
Co Donegal  
Tel: 071 986 1924  
Email: theforgefrsc@eircom.net

### Killybegs Cancer Support Group

Kille  
Kilcar  
Co Donegal  
Tel: 074 973 1292  
Email: riverbankdunne@eircom.net

### Newbridge Cancer Support Group

Tel: 083 360 9898  
Email:  
newbridgecancerhealinghelp@gmail.com

### Purple House – Cancer Support

Aubrey Court  
Parnell Road  
Bray  
Co Wicklow  
Tel: 01 286 6966  
Email: info@purplehouse.ie  
Website: www.braycancersupport.ie

### Sláinte an Chláir: Clare Cancer Support

Tír Mhuire  
Kilnamona  
Ennis  
Co Clare  
Tel: 1850 211 630  
Email: admin@clarecancersupport.com  
Website: www.clarecancersupport.com

### Solace: Donegal Cancer Support Centre

St Joseph's Avenue  
Donegal Town  
Tel: 074 974 0837  
Email: solacedonegal@eircom.net

For other support groups or centres  
in your area, call 1800 200 700.

## Useful contacts outside Republic of Ireland

### Action Cancer

Action Cancer House  
1 Marlborough Park  
Belfast BT9 6XS  
Tel: 028 9080 3344  
Email: info@actioncancer.org  
Website: www.actioncancer.org

### American Cancer Society (US)

Website: www.cancer.org

### Cancer Focus Northern Ireland

40–44 Eglantine Avenue  
Belfast BT9 6DX  
Tel: 048 9066 3281  
Email: hello@cancerfocusni.org  
Website: www.cancerfocusni.org

### Cancer Buddies Network

Website:  
www.cancerbuddiesnetwork.org

### Cancer Research UK

Tel: 0044 20 7242 0200  
Website: www.cancerhelp.org.uk

### Healthtalkonline (UK)

Website: www.healthtalk.org

### Macmillan Cancer Support (UK)

Tel: 0044 20 7840 7840  
Email: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk  
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

### Macmillan Support & Information Centre

Belfast City Hospital Trust  
77–81 Lisburn Road  
Belfast BT9 7AB  
Tel: 028 9069 9202  
Email: cancerinfo@belfasttrust.hscni.net  
Website: www.cancerni.net

### National Cancer Institute (US)

Website: www.nci.nih.gov

## Helpful books

### Free booklets from the Irish Cancer Society:

- *Understanding Radiotherapy*
- *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*
- *Diet and Cancer*
- *Coping with Fatigue*
- *Understanding the Emotional Effects of Cancer*
- *Lost for Words: How to Talk to Someone with Cancer*
- *Who Can Ever Understand? Taking About Your Cancer*
- *Talking to Children about Cancer: A Guide for Parents*
- *Managing the Financial Impact of Cancer: A Guide for Patients and their Families*
- *Journey Journal: Keeping Track of Your Cancer Treatment*



### **Challenging Cancer: Fighting Back, Taking Control, Finding Options**

Maurice Slevin & Nira Kfir  
Class Publishing, 2002  
ISBN 978-1859590683

### **The Chemotherapy and Radiation Therapy Survival Guide: Information, Suggestions, and Support to Help You Get through Treatment**

J McKay, N Hirano & ME Lampenfeld  
New Harbinger, 1998  
ISBN 978-15722407094

### **Coping with Chemotherapy**

Dr Terry Priestman  
Sheldon Press, 2009  
ISBN 978-1847090805

### **101+ Square Meals**

[Budget and nutrition]  
Norah Bourke et al  
MABS/HSE West/Paul  
Partnership/Limerick VEC/Safefood, 1998  
ISBN 187407514X  
[For more details, see [www.mabs.ie](http://www.mabs.ie)]

### Explaining cancer to children

#### **The Secret C: Straight Talking About Cancer**

Julie A Stokes  
Winston's Wish, 2000  
ISBN 978-0953912308

### Helpful DVD

#### **A Guide to Chemotherapy**

HSE/Mid-Western Cancer Centre/ICS,  
2008  
Call 1800 200 700 for a copy.

For more details on helpful and up-to-date books, call the National Cancer Helpline on Freefone 1800 200 700.

## What does that word mean?

- Adjuvant chemotherapy** Treatment given soon after surgery and when a diagnosis of cancer is made.
- Advanced cancer** When cancer cells break away from a tumour and travel through your bloodstream or lymphatic system to other parts of your body, where they develop into new tumours. Also called a secondary cancer or metastases.
- Alopecia** Hair loss. No hair where you normally have hair.
- Anaemia** Fewer red blood cells (haemoglobin) in your blood. This can make you feel tired, weak and breathless.
- Anti-emetic** A tablet, injection or suppository given to stop you feeling sick or vomiting.
- Benign** Not cancer. A tumour that does not spread.
- Biological therapy** A treatment that uses your body's immune system to fight cancer, infection, and other diseases. It is also used to reduce certain side-effects that may be caused by some cancer treatments.
- Bone marrow** Spongy material found in your bones that makes three types of blood cells: red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets.
- Cannula** A small tube put into a vein in your arm or on the back of your hand to give chemotherapy drugs.
- Central line** A long, thin flexible tube passed through your skin and into a large vein in your chest, neck or groin.
- Chemotherapy** Treatment with anti-cancer drugs. Also known as chemo.

<b>Cycle</b>	A chemotherapy period.
<b>Cytotoxic</b>	A drug that can kill cancer cells and healthy cells.
<b>Fatigue</b>	Ongoing tiredness, often not eased by rest.
<b>Haemoglobin</b>	The protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen.
<b>Implantable port</b>	A small round metal or plastic disc that sits under the skin on your upper chest or arm. It is connected to a tube which leads to a large vein just above your heart. Also called a portacath.
<b>Intravenous</b>	Into a vein. Also called IV.
<b>Lymphatic system</b>	A network of tiny tubes like your bloodstream that transports a fluid called lymph around your body. Lymph helps to protect your body against infection but can also spread cancer cells.
<b>Malignant</b>	Cancer.
<b>Medical oncologist</b>	A doctor who specialises in treating cancer patients with chemotherapy or other drugs.
<b>Nausea</b>	Feeling sick or wanting to be sick.
<b>Neo-adjuvant</b>	Treatment given before surgery to shrink the size of the cancer.
<b>Neutropenia</b>	When there are fewer neutrophils, a type of white blood cell. This can lead to infection.
<b>Oncology</b>	The study of cancer.
<b>Palliative</b>	Treatment given to improve symptoms of cancer, such as pain, pressure or bleeding, and improve quality of life.
<b>PICC line</b>	A peripherally inserted central catheter. This is a thin, flexible tube passed into a vein in your arm and tunnelled through until the end of the tube lies in a large vein near your heart.
<b>Portacath</b>	See implantable port.

## Questions to ask your doctor

Here is a list of questions people often want to ask. There is also some space for you to write down your own questions if you wish. Never be shy about asking questions. It is always better to ask than to worry.

- Will chemotherapy cure or control my cancer? Will it stop it returning?
- Where can I have my treatment? Do I have to stay in hospital or can it be given at home?
- How will the chemotherapy be given?
- How long will my treatment take?
- What drugs am I receiving?
- What tests will I have before treatment each time?
- How will I know if the treatment is working?
- What side-effects will I have? Can I take something to control the side-effects?

## Your own questions

1

Answer

2

Answer

3

Answer

## Acknowledgements

We would like to extend a special word of thanks to the following for their invaluable contributions to this booklet and/or previous editions, or for the reproduction of images:

Rotunda IVF

Michelle Quinn, Oncology Liaison Nurse

Mary Quinn, Clinical Nurse Specialist

Eileen O'Donovan, Cancer Information Nurse

Aoife McNamara, Cancer Information Nurse

Irish Oncology and Haematology Social Workers Group

Michael H Phillips, Illustrator

Elizabeth Tobin, Cancer Information Service Nurse

Dr Edgar Mocanu, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist

Antoinette Walker, Patient Education Editor

## Would you like more information?

We hope this booklet has been of help to you. After reading it or at any time in the future, if you would like more information or someone to talk to, please phone our National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700.

## Would you like to be a patient reviewer?



If you have any suggestions as to how this booklet could be improved, we would be delighted to hear from you. The views of patients, relatives, carers and friends are all welcome. Your comments would help us greatly in the preparation of future information booklets for people with cancer and their carers.

If you wish to email your comments, have an idea for a new booklet or would like to review any of our booklets, please contact us at **reviewers@irishcancer.ie**

If you would prefer to phone or write to us, see contact details below.

## Would you like to help us?

The Irish Cancer Society relies entirely on voluntary contributions from the public to fund its programmes of patient care, education and research. This includes our patient booklets. If you would like to support our work in any way – perhaps by making a donation or by organising a local fundraising event – please contact us at CallSave 1850 60 60 60 or email **fundraising@irishcancer.ie**

**Irish Cancer Society, 43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4.**

**Tel:** 01 231 0500; **Email:** info@irishcancer.ie; **Website:** www.cancer.ie

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43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4

T: 01 231 0500

E: [info@irishcancer.ie](mailto:info@irishcancer.ie)

W: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

National Cancer Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700

Open Monday to Thursday 9am to 7pm

Friday 9am to 5pm

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