

Key points

Chemotherapy uses medicines to destroy or slow the growth of cancer cells. Different chemotherapy drugs or combinations are used depending on the type and stage of lung cancer. Different drugs or combinations of drugs are used in different cancers.

Chemotherapy may be given as a tablet, but more commonly is given directly into a vein.

Why a patient would be given chemotherapy in a lung cancer setting:

Chemotherapy may be used:

- before surgery (neoadjuvant therapy) to shrink a tumour
- after surgery (adjuvant therapy) to reduce the risk of recurrence
- with radiation therapy (concurrent chemoradiation) for some locally advanced cancers
- for advanced or metastatic disease to slow cancer growth, prolong survival and relieve symptoms.

People may have chemotherapy to treat their cancer. Your treatment team may give you chemotherapy to shrink tumours, control advanced cancers, slow cancer growth, prolong survival, or improve symptoms.

It cleans away cancer cells that are left after other treatments, such as surgery.

Chemotherapy may relieve symptoms caused by the cancer. Chemotherapy kills normal, healthy cells too, which causes side effects.

Sometimes several drugs are given at the same time. Lung cancer chemotherapy can be the main type of treatment, or it can be used along with surgery and/or radiation treatment. Lung cancer chemotherapy can be used to shrink the tumour before another treatment.

It is also used to kill any cancer cells that are still there after another treatment. It may also be used in later stages of the cancer to relieve cancer symptoms.

Chemotherapy may be given:

- with immunotherapy
- before immunotherapy
- after immunotherapy
- or alongside targeted therapies in selected situations.

Most chemotherapy is taken as a pill or given by drip intravenous (IV) line. Chemotherapy treatment for lung cancer is given in cycles. Each treatment cycle is followed by a period of time to get over it.

Chemotherapy may temporarily reduce the white cells that fight infection so will be recycled when the blood count has recovered. For example, this may mean that a chemotherapy combination is recycled every three weeks.

Chemotherapy can damage normal cells and therefore cause side effects, but normal cells recover better than cancer cells do.

Possible side effects of chemotherapy

- Tiredness
- Nausea (feeling sick), possible vomiting
- Infection
- Constipation/diarrhoea
- Easy bruising and bleeding
- Sore mouth
- Anaemia – decrease in red blood cells
- Hair loss – not everyone will experience hair loss
- Changes in appetite and taste
- Dry skin and nails
- Tingling or numbness in the hands and feet
- Emotional changes
- Brain fog
- Weight gain
- Fertility changes

It is unusual for people to experience all of the symptoms, and not everyone gets them. They often go away with time.

Discuss your concerns and possible side effects with your doctor before chemotherapy starts and each time you see the chemotherapy team during treatment.