



# Understanding oral medications for cancer treatment

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Specialty Pharmacy

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# What you need to know about oral chemotherapy

Learning how to manage your oral chemotherapy might feel challenging, especially at first. But understanding what to expect can help you take charge of your health. We want to help you get the most from your treatment. This booklet discusses how staying on track with your medication therapy and lifestyle changes can help you live a full and active life.

## Staying on track with treatment

Oral chemotherapy drugs are used to slow the growth of cancer or kill cancer cells. Your healthcare provider has prescribed your medication because it is the best choice for your treatment. But you must take your medication as prescribed — at the right times and the correct doses.

Certain things might make it feel hard to stay on track with treatment, such as:

- A complex medication schedule that might involve taking 10, 20 or more pills a day
- Combination therapy with multiple types of medications
- Side effects, like fatigue and nausea, which can affect everyday life and make it hard to get into a regular treatment routine

Even after the first few weeks of treatment, it might be hard to stay motivated. The benefits might seem like they're too far in the future as you deal with side effects and inconvenience in the present. Some people decide on their own to cut back their dose. Others decide to take a "break" for weeks or even months at a time. But doing this can affect the success of treatment.

If your treatment routine starts to feel too hard, ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for help managing your medications. Do not stop taking your medications without asking your healthcare provider first. Staying on track with treatment is important to your health.

## Know what your medication looks like

Make sure you are taking the right amount of the proper medication. This is very important if you take different medications at different times of day. Many cancer drugs come in different strengths. Some people need to take two different strengths at the same time. Taking the wrong pills could result in taking too much of a medication (overdose) or too little (underdose).

Different strengths of the same drug can differ in the following ways:

- Color
- Letters, words or numbers printed on pills
- Shape
- Size

Look carefully at your medication as you are about to take it. Be mindful of what you are doing. This can help you be sure you are taking the right medication at the right time. This is especially important if your healthcare provider changes your medication dose or schedule.

# Know how to take your medication

This should be the easy part, right? You just swallow the medication, usually with water. While that's true, it also matters when you take it and what else, if anything, you take along with it. If it's a pill, it might matter whether or not you swallow it whole.

## When to take your medication

Many oral chemotherapy drugs are taken at the same time every day. Others are taken on schedules that can change from week to week. Be sure to know your medication schedules. This lowers the risk of forgetting a dose. It also helps ensure the most benefit from the medication.

- Be aware that you might need to wait a certain number of hours between doses of certain medications.
- Try taking your medication at the same time as other routine tasks. For example, for medications you must take in the evening, plan to take them after brushing your teeth or as you get ready for bed. This might make you less likely to forget a dose.
- Set an alarm to remind yourself to take your medication, both at home and away from home.

## How to swallow your medication

Many pills should not be broken, cut or crushed. This can make some drugs ineffective or create inaccurate doses. Be especially careful if capsules are accidentally opened or damaged. The contents of some oral chemotherapy capsules should not touch your skin or mucous membranes, including nasal passages, because they can be very irritating. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist if this precaution applies to your medication.

# Know your medication

You should know key details about your medication, even when it's not in front of you. If you don't, take a close look at your medication, including the label and instructions. The instructions might include pictures and descriptions of the medication that call out certain features to help you recognize them. Keep the information with your medication so you can refer to it in the future. Review everything until you know these details without looking at your medication.

Using the following form as a guide, fill in the blanks for each drug you take.

## Medication 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Strength: \_\_\_\_\_

Shape: \_\_\_\_\_

Color: \_\_\_\_\_

Identifying letters or numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

Color of letters or numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

## Medication 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Strength: \_\_\_\_\_

Shape: \_\_\_\_\_

Color: \_\_\_\_\_

Identifying letters or numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

Color of letters or numbers: \_\_\_\_\_





Most oral chemotherapy drugs should be swallowed whole with water unless your healthcare provider has told you otherwise. If you find it hard to swallow pills, the following tips might help:

- Place the pill on the tip of your tongue. Drink some water. Tilt your head back and swallow.
- If that doesn't work, place the pill on the back of your tongue. Drink some water. Tilt your chin down toward your chest and swallow.
- Take a deep breath before placing the pill in your mouth. This can help stop the gag reflex.
- Always sit up straight when swallowing pills.
- Drink a whole glass of cold water while swallowing a pill.
- If your medication may be taken with food, try taking it with a soft food like applesauce, yogurt or pudding. Soft foods can be easier to swallow than liquids.

If these techniques don't help, tell your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

### **What to take with your medication**

You should know if you may take your medication with food. Some oral chemotherapy drugs should be taken with food while others should be taken on an empty stomach. Still other drugs are not affected by food at all. Here are some points to remember:

- Taking certain medications with food can reduce the risk of side effects.
- For other medications, food can increase the chance of side effects.
- A full stomach might affect how well the body absorbs medication.
- In most cases, taking a drug without food means taking it either one hour before or two hours after a meal.
- Grapefruit can affect how some drugs work. You might need to avoid grapefruit products while taking certain drugs.

Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist if any of these apply to your medication.

## Your medication and food

If your medication may be taken with food, it is important to know exactly what that means. Look at your medication instructions. Using the following form as a guide, choose the best answer for each drug you take.

### Medication 1 \_\_\_\_\_

I should take my cancer medication:

- just before, right after or with a meal.
- without food, typically one hour before or two hours after a meal.
- with or without food, whichever is easiest for me at the time.

I need to avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice:

- Yes     No

### Medication 2 \_\_\_\_\_

I should take my cancer medication:

- just before, right after or with a meal.
- without food, typically one hour before or two hours after a meal.
- with or without food, whichever is easiest for me at the time.

I need to avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice:

- Yes     No

If your medication instructions don't help you answer these questions, talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

## Know what to do if you miss a dose

You should know what to do if you forget to take your medication, forget if you took your most recent dose or throw up soon after taking a dose.

Be prepared. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist in advance what you should do if you miss a dose. Find out when to tell your healthcare provider about missed doses. With some drugs, you might need to tell your healthcare provider if you miss even just one dose.

Don't simply skip a dose or take a double dose to "catch up" if something like this happens. If you aren't sure what to do, call your healthcare provider or pharmacist right away.

## Make it easy to remember to take your medication

There are many ways to remind yourself to take your medication. Find ways that work for you and your schedule. Adjust them to suit your lifestyle.

### Organize your medications

- Use a daily medication box (pill box) to organize your medication. A pill box can help you see each dose and remember if you have taken your medication for a particular day and time. Do this only if your medication does not need to stay in its original container and does not need special handling. All prescription drugs have information about how they should be kept. Read and follow the storage and handling requirements for your medication so your medications remain safe to take.
- If you take medications at different times each day, choose a pill box with extra dividers for morning, evening, bedtime or hourly doses.

- Never put your medication in an unlabeled bottle or combine different medications in a single bottle. Even if you know what your medication looks like, it's easy to make mistakes.
- Carry an extra dose of each medication with you in case you misplace your medication box or are away from home longer than expected.

### Use alarms and alerts

- Set an alarm on a clock, watch or cell phone to remind yourself to take your medication
- Some pill boxes have built-in alarms
- Use a computer to set up a daily calendar alert or an email reminder
- Use a medication reminder app to receive alerts on a smartphone or tablet

### Write it down

- Write your medication schedule on a calendar near your medications.
- List each medication and when to take it.
- Include your medication on a daily to-do list. Check it off when you've taken it.

### Stay on schedule when traveling

- Pack extra medication and bring reminders with you
- Use alarms, instead of daily habits or chores, to remind you to take your medication
- If you are crossing time zones, ask your doctor if you need to adjust your medication schedule

## What to do if you miss a dose

Look at your medication instructions. Using the following form as a guide, fill in the blanks for each drug you take.

### Medication 1 \_\_\_\_\_

If I miss a dose and remember it the same day, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If I miss a dose and don't remember it until the following day, or if it is almost time for the next dose, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If I can't remember if I took my most recent dose, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If I throw up after taking my medication, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

### Medication 2 \_\_\_\_\_

If I miss a dose and remember it the same day, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If I miss a dose and don't remember it until the following day, or if it is almost time for the next dose, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If I can't remember if I took my most recent dose, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If I throw up after taking my medication, I should \_\_\_\_\_.

If your medication instructions don't help answer these questions, call your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

## Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Some cancer drugs can cause birth defects. It is important to use birth control as directed to prevent pregnancy. This applies to men and women receiving treatment.<sup>1</sup> The type of birth control to use will depend on your individual situation. Ask your healthcare provider which form of birth control is best for you.<sup>2</sup>

A woman who is already pregnant when receiving a cancer diagnosis should discuss treatment options with her healthcare provider. In some cases, treatment might be possible during certain stages of pregnancy. In other cases, it might be necessary to wait until after the baby is born.<sup>3</sup>

Many cancer drugs can pass into breast milk. They should not be taken while breastfeeding. This can be harmful to a baby. Ask your healthcare provider if and when you can safely begin or resume breastfeeding after chemotherapy.<sup>4</sup>

## Your healthcare team is here to help

Some people don't start taking their medication when they should. Some skip doses because they are tired, don't feel well or are trying to avoid side effects. Others have depression, anxiety or lack of energy that prevent them from taking their medication. If you are having challenges like these, talk with your healthcare provider or pharmacist. Your healthcare team can help, no matter how far off track you think you might be.

## Know what to expect

Many people worry about the side effects of cancer drugs. These concerns might make it hard to stay on track with your treatment. Try to have realistic expectations about how you will feel during treatment.

- If you already have had other types of chemotherapy, you might have certain expectations based on that experience.
- Your current treatment could have fewer or less severe side effects than past treatments. It might have different side effects. Do not think of oral chemotherapy as “more of the same” chemotherapy.
- Learn as much as you can about your medication's side effects. Find tips on how to deal with them. This can help you get through your treatment.
- Talk with your healthcare provider, pharmacist and others on your healthcare team.







# Coping with side effects

Oral chemotherapy can have many side effects. These might include<sup>1</sup>:

- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Nausea and vomiting
- Skin reactions

You might not have any of these side effects, but you might have others.<sup>1</sup> Your healthcare team is the best source of information about side effects and your health. Talk to your healthcare team about these side effects and how likely they are to affect you.

## Diarrhea

Chemotherapy can affect the cells lining the intestine, which can lead to diarrhea.<sup>1</sup> Loose or watery bowel movements can affect how you feel. They can also dehydrate your body. In severe cases, your healthcare provider might prescribe antidiarrheal drugs. Don't take any over-the-counter (OTC) products for diarrhea without asking your healthcare provider or pharmacist.

Changing your diet could reduce diarrhea. This might mean following a brief diet of clear liquids or foods that are easy to digest while staying away from other foods.<sup>1</sup> Small changes can help keep diarrhea from getting worse. Ask your healthcare provider if changing your diet might help you.

### How to follow a clear liquid diet

Even when you don't feel like eating, it's important to replace fluids lost through diarrhea. Trying a liquid diet for a short time might help.<sup>1</sup> Choose clear, caffeine-free and alcohol-free liquids like these<sup>1</sup>:

- Apple juice, peach or apricot nectar
- Clear broth

- Ginger ale
- Ice pops or gelatin desserts
- Sports drinks with electrolytes
- Water
- Weak, decaffeinated tea

Drink these liquids at room temperature. Let carbonated drinks lose their fizz before drinking them.<sup>1</sup> This makes them easier on the stomach. Sip liquids throughout the day. Do not try to drink a lot at one time.

### Choose foods that are easy to digest

If a clear liquid diet improves your diarrhea, you should be able to ease back into solid foods. Try foods that are easy to digest, such as bananas, rice, applesauce and dry toast.<sup>1</sup> This is often called the BRAT diet. Other foods that are easy to digest include mashed potatoes and yogurt (if dairy is tolerated). If your diarrhea continues to improve after a day or two on a BRAT diet, you might be able to begin trying small, regular meals.<sup>5</sup>

## Tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all of your medications

Be sure to tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all medications you are taking. Always check with your healthcare provider before starting any new medication, including herbals, vitamins, supplements, prescription drugs and OTC products. These can interfere with cancer drugs or put your health at risk. You shouldn't take any new medication — not even once — without talking with your doctor first.



### **Avoid food and drinks that can worsen diarrhea**

Many foods and drinks can irritate a touchy digestive system and make diarrhea worse. You might need to avoid some foods, such as<sup>5</sup>:

- Acidic drinks like tomato juice, citrus juices and fizzy soft drinks
- Alcohol, including beer, wine and mixed drinks
- Caffeinated drinks like coffee, tea, colas and energy drinks
- Greasy, fried or spicy foods
- High-fiber foods like bran and raw fruits and vegetables
- Milk or milk products, if they make diarrhea worse
- Nuts
- Sweets such as pastries, candy or preserves

### **When to call your healthcare provider**

The American Cancer Society recommends calling your healthcare provider if you have any of the following<sup>5</sup>:

- Loose bowel movements several times a day or for 1 to 4 days, depending on instructions given when treatment starts

- Anal bleeding or blood in the stool
- New belly pain or cramps or a swollen belly
- No urinating for 12 hours or more
- No ability to drink fluids for 24 hours or more
- A fever of a certain level when taken by mouth, as instructed when treatment starts
- Constipation for many days followed by small amounts of diarrhea or oozing of liquid stool

Always follow your healthcare provider's instructions about when to call with your concerns.

## **Fatigue**

Fatigue is extreme tiredness. It can happen from time to time. It can also happen more regularly over a long period of time. It is the most common side effect of cancer treatment.<sup>6</sup> It can also be caused by other things, including<sup>6-8</sup>:

- Anemia, or low red blood cell count
- Dehydration, or extreme loss of body fluids
- Infection
- Pain
- Poor sleep

Fatigue can make you feel exhausted. It can also cause the following symptoms<sup>6</sup>:

- Lack of energy
- Sleeping more
- Tiredness, even after sleeping
- Trouble concentrating or feeling motivated
- Trouble doing everyday things, like showering

Feeling fatigued does not necessarily mean your cancer is getting worse or that your treatment is not working. And it is not a sign of weakness or a lack of willpower or determination.

Fatigue can affect your quality of life. For some, it can affect the ability to work, care for a family or receive treatment. Only you know how much it is affecting you. Managing it can help you have the energy you need for daily activities and treatment.

Tell your healthcare provider about your fatigue. Your healthcare provider might ask you some questions, such as<sup>8</sup>:

- When did the fatigue first start?
- When did you first notice that this fatigue is different?
- How long has it lasted?
- Does anything make it better? Worse?
- Are there times of day that you notice it more?
- How has the fatigue affected the things you do every day or the activities that give meaning and enjoyment to your life?

Your healthcare provider might also check for other causes, like anemia or thyroid problems. The following tips can help you manage fatigue and feel better overall.

## Stay active

When you are less active, you often feel more tired. Exercise can help control fatigue and restore your energy.<sup>6,8</sup> It might also help you sleep better and improve your appetite.

- Talk to your healthcare provider about how much activity is right for you.
- Choose activities you enjoy.
- Try gentle activities, like walking or bicycling.
- A physical therapist might be able to help you design an exercise program.
- Balance activity with rest.

## Eat well

Fighting cancer affects how your body changes food into energy. The cancer is competing with the rest of your body for nutrients at a time when you might feel like eating less. It's easy to see how poor nutrition can contribute to fatigue during treatment. It's vital to find ways to keep a balanced diet that meets your body's needs.<sup>6-8</sup>

- Try to have protein, fiber and fat at each meal.
- Avoid sugary foods. They might give you an initial jolt of energy but leave you tired later.
- Drink plenty of caffeine-free fluids.
- Ask your healthcare provider or a dietitian to help you build a diet to fight fatigue.
- Ask your healthcare provider if you should take a multivitamin.

## Prioritize tasks

Careful planning can help you work around your fatigue.<sup>6,8</sup>

- Do the most difficult or most important tasks when you have the most energy. For some, this might be first thing in the morning. For others, it might be in the afternoon.
- Look at your to-do list. Skip anything that isn't truly necessary.
- Break large tasks into smaller ones.
- If possible, consider cutting back on work hours.

## Ask for help

Though it might feel difficult at first, it's vital to ask others for help. Don't be embarrassed. Your family and friends want you to be well and are often willing to help. They might be able to help with many things, including:

- Grocery shopping and meal preparation
- Rides to and from medical appointments
- Housework, yard work or child care

## Manage stress

Cancer and its treatment are stressful. Worry and anxiety can cause mental and physical fatigue. This can leave you feeling wiped out. Learning how to control stress can help you feel better.

- Talk to a counselor or join a cancer support group.
- Don't be afraid to ask your healthcare provider questions about your treatment.
- Try to avoid situations that cause you stress.
- Find ways to relax. This might include sitting in a park, gardening or walking in a pleasant setting.

## Get enough sleep

Getting enough sleep helps manage fatigue. Think of rest as an important part of your treatment. Schedule it into your daily routine.

- Aim for at least eight hours of sleep each night.
- If you nap, do so earlier in the day. Keep naps shorter than 30 minutes.
- As bedtime approaches, avoid things that can distract you from sleep, such as exercising, having caffeine or using electronic devices.
- Tell your healthcare provider if you wake often during the night or have trouble falling asleep. They can offer guidance and suggestions on how to improve your sleep.

## Ask about medications for treating fatigue

Sometimes fatigue is caused by things that do not improve through lifestyle changes alone. In these cases, you might need medication or other treatments to manage fatigue.

- For example, fatigue might be caused by anemia, or a low red blood cell count.<sup>7</sup> This can be a side effect of chemotherapy.
- Your healthcare provider might prescribe medication to treat anemia. These drugs help the body create more red blood cells. In some cases, blood transfusions might also help.
- Fatigue might also have causes not related to anemia. Your healthcare provider might prescribe different medications in these cases.

## Be flexible

Try to be patient and flexible about what your body needs. This can change often. Work with your healthcare team to keep finding strategies that help.

- Not every approach works the same way for all people.
- Something that used to help might not work as well over time.
- Make a note of what helps and what doesn't.
- Notice any patterns. Work with your healthcare provider to adjust things as needed.

## When to call your healthcare provider

The American Cancer Society recommends calling your healthcare provider if you have any of the following<sup>6</sup>:

- You feel too tired to get out of bed for a 24-hour period
- You feel confused, dizzy, lose your balance or fall



- You have problems waking up
- You have problems catching your breath
- The fatigue seems to be getting worse

Always follow your healthcare provider's instructions about when to call with your concerns.

## Nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting are common side effects of cancer treatment. They can be unpleasant and difficult to deal with.

- Nausea makes you feel queasy or sick to your stomach.
- You might have a watery mouth, dizziness or a fast heartbeat.
- Nausea can make you vomit, or throw up. This can dehydrate your body.
- You might have a weak appetite. This can cause weight loss and affect your treatment.

- Work with your healthcare team to prevent or reduce nausea and vomiting. This might include any of the following:
- Changing eating habits
- Taking anti-nausea drugs if prescribed by your healthcare provider
- Other comfort measures

### Eat well

How, what and when you eat can affect how you feel during treatment. There will be times when you just don't want to eat. To make eating easier, find nutritious foods you enjoy and take advantage of times when your appetite is strongest. Many people find that breakfast time is best.

Here are some tips for days when you are feeling nauseated<sup>9</sup>:

- Choose foods that you like, especially ones that are simple, bland and easy to eat.
- Eat foods cold or at room temperature. This can lessen smells and tastes that might trigger nausea.
- If cooking smells bother you, ask someone else to prepare your meals.
- Instead of three large meals a day, eat smaller meals every two to three hours throughout the day. This might help you avoid feeling too hungry or too full, which might both trigger nausea.

If you are on a special diet for other conditions, like diabetes, talk with your healthcare provider before changing your diet.



## When to treat nausea and vomiting with prescription drugs

In most cases, changing how you eat is only part of the solution. Your healthcare provider might also prescribe anti-nausea drugs. Table 1 lists drugs used to treat the nausea and vomiting that are common with cancer

treatment. Your healthcare provider will recommend one that is right for you. Talk to your healthcare provider if diet changes and anti-nausea drugs do not help.

**Table 1. Anti-nausea drugs<sup>10,11</sup>**

Drug name	Notes
Aprepitant, fosaprepitant, fosnetupitan, netupitant, rolapitant	These help with delayed nausea and vomiting
Cimetidine, famotidine, lansoprazole, omeprazole, pantoprazole	These help decrease stomach acid and might be used to control nausea
Dexamethasone	This corticosteroid can be used alone or with other anti-nausea drugs
Diphenhydramine	This antihistamine helps reduce side effects from other anti-nausea drugs
Dolasetron, granisetron, ondansetron, palonosetron	These are common anti-nausea drugs
Dronabinol	This can help control nausea and vomiting when other drugs have failed to do so
Metoclopramide, prochlorperazine, promethazine	These may be used as needed to control nausea
Lorazepam	This has calming and anti-nausea effects and is often used with other anti-nausea drugs
Olanzapine	This can be used with other drugs to help prevent acute and delayed vomiting

## More tips for easing nausea and vomiting

- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes.
- Open a window or use a fan to get some fresh air when you feel queasy.
- Clean your mouth after throwing up.
- If you have mouth sores or other trouble with your lips, mouth or throat, ask your healthcare team about oral hygiene products that might help.

# Skin reactions

Oral chemotherapy drugs might cause skin problems. Some cancer drugs target substances in the body that tell cancer cells to grow and multiply. These same substances are also found in normal skin cells. Drugs that target these substances often affect normal skin cells. They turn off the signals that tell normal skin cells to grow, making it harder for those cells to hold on to moisture. This can cause dry skin and rashes.

## How to treat dry skin

Many people notice dry skin when taking oral chemotherapy drugs. Very dry skin is itchy, and scratching can lead to infection. You can take some simple steps to help avoid dry and itchy skin<sup>12,13</sup>:

- Bathe or shower in lukewarm — not hot — water. Hot water can dry out your skin.
- Take short baths or showers. Do not scrub your skin. Pat yourself dry.
- Use an unscented, moisturizing cleanser. Added fragrances can irritate your skin.
- Use a hypoallergenic, water-based unscented body cream. Creams moisturize better than lotions. Apply cream after bathing, while your skin is still damp. This helps lock in moisture. Apply the cream twice a day.
- Avoid wearing rough fabrics and materials like wool and synthetic fibers, which can irritate your skin.
- Drink plenty of fluids. This will keep your skin hydrated.



## How to manage a rash

Most people who develop a rash from oral chemotherapy experience a mild skin eruption. It often looks like acne and can be itchy.

- The rash can start within the first two weeks of starting medication.<sup>14</sup>
- The rash usually affects the scalp, face, chest or upper back. In more severe cases, the rash can affect other parts of the body.
- Eventually, the skin crusts and becomes dry and red. Round, flat or raised red spots and whitehead pimples with pus might appear.
- The rash can come and go. Sometimes it goes away on its own. It should go away completely about a month after finishing treatment.<sup>15</sup>

Tell your healthcare provider as soon as you notice signs of a rash. Early treatment can help prevent it from getting worse. Other simple steps can help you manage a rash<sup>15</sup>:

- Avoid direct sunlight. Sunlight can trigger rashes in some people. Wear long sleeves and a hat outdoors. Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 and zinc oxide or titanium dioxide at least 1 hour before going out.
- Bathe in lukewarm — not hot — water. Hot water can dry out your skin. Try an oatmeal bath product to soothe your skin.

- Don't treat the rash like acne. Don't use acne products like benzoyl peroxide. These can dry the skin.
- Moisturize your skin with a thick cream at least twice a day. Do this after bathing, while your skin is still damp. This helps lock in moisture.
- Use soaps, shampoos, moisturizers and detergents that do not have alcohol, perfume or dye.

Tell your healthcare provider about any rashes or skin changes. Without treatment, these skin reactions can get worse and might cause infection. This would require pausing or even stopping cancer treatment. Don't treat your skin with OTC products or stop taking your cancer drugs without talking to your healthcare provider first.

If your healthcare provider prescribes medication for skin reactions, use it as instructed. Tell your healthcare provider if your skin does not improve.

Table 2 lists drugs often used to treat a rash. The list includes medicated creams and lotions to soothe skin. It also includes oral medications to control symptoms and eruptions.

**Table 2. Medications for rash<sup>15,16</sup>**

Drug type	Notes
Antihistamines (diphenhydramine, loratadine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These can help relieve itching but have limited effectiveness</li><li>• Some of these are available as OTC products</li></ul>
Corticosteroid creams (hydrocortisone, triamcinolone)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These can reduce inflammation and pain</li><li>• Prescription creams are stronger than OTC creams</li><li>• Your healthcare provider might prescribe different types or strengths of corticosteroids, depending on your rash</li><li>• Apply cream after cleaning skin gently with a mild, soap-free cleanser</li><li>• Use only as directed by your healthcare provider, as prolonged use can cause other skin problems</li></ul>
Oral antibiotics (doxycycline, minocycline, tetracycline)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These are often given for two weeks at a time; take only as prescribed</li><li>• It can take several weeks to see any change</li><li>• These can make you more sensitive to the sun; use daily sunscreen and avoid direct sunlight</li></ul>
OTC pain relievers (acetaminophen, ibuprofen)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• These can help relieve discomfort</li><li>• Ibuprofen also helps reduce swelling</li></ul>
Topical antibiotics (clindamycin, erythromycin, metronidazole)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use carefully, as these can irritate and dry skin</li><li>• Use cotton swabs to apply medication to the affected area only and avoid drying the skin</li><li>• Your healthcare provider might recommend using topical antibiotics every other day before moving to daily use</li></ul>



## Hand-foot skin reaction

Some oral chemotherapy drugs can cause a skin rash called hand-foot skin reaction (HFSR), often in the first few weeks of treatment.<sup>17</sup> HFSR affects the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. It can cause the following symptoms:

- Bleeding
- Blisters
- Feeling of “pins and needles”
- Numbness
- Redness
- Swelling
- Tingling

HFSR rashes can start out feeling like sunburn. This can later change into itchy or tender pimples or small red bumps.

Recognizing and treating HFSR early might prevent it from becoming severe. If you are taking medications that might cause HFSR, try the following tips to help prevent it<sup>18</sup>:

- Avoid prolonged contact with hot water. This includes washing dishes or taking hot baths and showers.
- Avoid too much friction on your skin, particularly on your hands and feet. This might mean avoiding or limiting everyday



activities like jogging, long walks, gardening with tools or even typing. This is especially important in the first month of treatment.

- Don't wear tight shoes. Wear cotton socks. Use gel shoe inserts.
- Use a moisturizing cream with urea to help soften thickened skin. Apply to skin right after bathing and again before bed. Cover with cotton gloves or socks while you sleep to help retain moisture.



# Finding support

Dealing with cancer and its treatment can be difficult and stressful. It can be tiring, both emotionally and physically. It's important to have help when you need it. Try to build a support network of family, friends and others who will support you throughout your treatment. Family members and friends often know you best. They can see how cancer affects your everyday life. They can help you cope.



## Expressing emotions

It's normal to feel depressed, angry, scared or helpless during your treatment. It is healthy to share your emotions with those you trust. It can sometimes help you feel better.

But know that not everyone will respond in the same way. Some might try to be overly cheerful while others might respond with negative or unhelpful comments.

Not everyone can give you the emotional support you need at all times. They might be struggling with their own emotions about your health. But don't let this stop you from finding support. You might simply decide not to talk about your cancer with certain people.

## Support groups and counseling

Even if your friends and family are supportive, you might still want to express your feelings in a different setting. You might want to talk to others going through the same thing. Finding additional ways to connect with others can help improve how you feel.

## Support groups

Support groups can offer a way to meet with others who share the experience of cancer diagnosis and treatment. You might be able to talk more openly about how cancer has changed your life. You might also find practical advice from others. Your healthcare provider, social worker or clergy member might be able to recommend a group for you.

There are many types of support groups. Some are led by healthcare professionals or clergy. Others are led by cancer patients and survivors. Some groups focus on specific types of cancer. Others are made for certain age groups. Consider carefully whether a certain group is right for you.

When researching support groups, consider the following:

- Are you comfortable discussing your emotions with others?
- Are you able to listen to other people's fears and worries without becoming too overwhelmed?
- Do you prefer a structured or informal discussion?
- Would you like a family member or friend to attend with you?
- Do you want religion or faith to be a part of the discussions?

If you prefer to be more anonymous or aren't able to attend group meetings, you might consider a group that meets online or by phone. Many national cancer organizations host virtual support groups. These can help you connect with others as much or as little as you would like.

## Individual counseling and therapy

You might feel that certain issues lend themselves best to one-on-one conversation. You might try talking with a counselor or therapist. This might make it easier to share personal or private concerns. Ask your healthcare team for a referral. They can suggest a counselor who is experienced in talking with cancer patients and survivors.



We provide this information because the more you know about oral chemotherapy, the better you'll be able to manage it.

Additionally, the Walgreens Specialty360 Therapy Team is here to support you with **dependable, personalized service** to help manage your medication side effects and stay on track with your prescribed therapy.

We look forward to being a member of your healthcare team and helping you get the best results from your treatment.



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# Resources

You might find it helpful to contact these organizations for additional support and resources.\*

## American Cancer Society (ACS)

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)  
800-227-2345  
[@AmericanCancerSociety](https://www.facebook.com/AmericanCancerSociety)

The ACS is a national health organization dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem. Its website features articles and tools for cancer education, treatment, support and research.

## MedlinePlus

[www.medlineplus.gov/cancer.html](http://www.medlineplus.gov/cancer.html)  
[@mplus.gov](https://www.facebook.com/mplus.gov)

MedlinePlus is a comprehensive online health resource from the U.S. National Library of Medicine. Its website features links to educational materials on cancer diagnosis, treatment and support and the latest news on cancer research.

## National Cancer Institute (NCI)

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)  
800-4-CANCER (226237)  
[@cancer.gov](https://www.facebook.com/cancer.gov)

The NCI conducts and fosters ongoing cancer research and promotes education on prevention, early detection, treatment, support and long-term survival. Its website features overview information on common types of cancer and treatments, statistics, clinical trials and research.

## National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN)

<https://www.nccn.org/patientresources/patient-resources>  
215-690-0300  
[@NCCNorg](https://www.facebook.com/NCCNorg)

The NCCN is a not-for-profit alliance of the world's leading cancer centers. Its website includes guidelines for patients and clinicians, as well as resources and support information for patients and their caregivers.

## OncoLink

[www.oncolink.org](http://www.oncolink.org)  
[@OncoLink](https://www.facebook.com/OncoLink)

OncoLink is an online cancer resource founded by cancer specialists at Penn Medicine. The website features overviews about specific types of cancer, the latest treatments and prevention education.

\*The referenced organizations are provided for informational purposes only. They are not affiliated with, and have not provided funding to, Walgreens Specialty Pharmacy for this booklet. Walgreens Specialty Pharmacy does not endorse or recommend any specific organization.





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