

Treating cancer with chemotherapy and immunotherapy: What you need to know

What are chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatments?

Chemotherapy (chemo) and immunotherapy are two different types of medications that treat cancer:

- Chemo is designed to directly kill cancer cells.
- Immunotherapy is designed to help your own immune system to kill cancer cells.

Why are these treatments being given together?

When chemo and immunotherapy are given together, they are better at treating some types of cancer than when each of the treatments are given alone.

Cancer cells can hide from your body's immune system. When cancer cells hide, your body cannot destroy them, and the cancer can grow out of control.

For some types of cancer, giving chemo with immunotherapy makes it harder for cancer cells to hide. This helps your body's own immune system to see and destroy the cancer cells.

Which cancers are being treated with chemo and immunotherapy?

Scientists are working to understand which cancers may respond well to chemo and immunotherapy together. Right now, the combination is being used to treat the following types of cancer:

- Lung
- Breast
- Lymphoma
- Gastrointestinal (cancer in the digestive organs)
- Endometrial (cancer of the lining of the uterus)



Ontario Health
Cancer Care Ontario

More cancer types will be treated with this combination of medications in the future.

How are the treatments given?

- Chemo may be given either by mouth, needle (injection into muscle or under the skin) or IV (infusion directly into your vein). You may receive more than 1 chemo medication as part of your chemo treatment regimen.
- Immunotherapy is given through an IV or a needle under the skin.

You may not get both chemo and immunotherapy every time you go for treatment.

- For instance, if you usually get chemo on day 1 and day 8 of your treatment cycle, immunotherapy may only be given on day 1.
- At some point in your treatment, you may stop getting chemo, but immunotherapy treatments may continue.
- Ask your health care team if you have any questions about your treatment schedule.

Which side effects need medical care right away?

When getting chemo and immunotherapy it is important that you tell your health care team **right away** if:

- You start having new side effects, especially if severe
- You notice any of your side effects getting worse

Some side effects can become serious or life-threatening very quickly.

The following side effects must be reported to your health care team right away when you are getting chemo and immunotherapy:

- Diarrhea
- A new cough
- Problems with breathing
- Rash
- Fever

If you develop any of the side effects above, do one of the following right away:

- Speak to your cancer clinic during clinic hours
- Call the after-hours nursing line
- Go to your local urgent care clinic or emergency room

Speak to your health care team if you have any concerns about side effects or any questions about your treatment plan.

Information within this document is intended for informational purposes only. Please be advised that this guide does not establish a healthcare provider-patient relationship, nor should it replace professional medical advice, diagnosis, and/or care. Please consult your health care team to address your specific questions or concerns. OH expressly disclaims any responsibility or liability for damages, loss, injury or liability resulting from your reliance on information within this guide. OH retains all copyright, trademark, and all other rights in the guide, including all text and graphic images. Other than for personal use, no portion of this resource may be used or reproduced, or distributed, transmitted or "mirrored" in any form, or by any means, without OH's prior written permission.

Should you require this information in an accessible format, please contact 1-877-280-8538, TTY 1-800-855-0511, info@ontariohealth.ca.

Document disponible en français en contactant info@ontariohealth.ca.

This guide was last updated March 2024.