

Coping with the Side Effects of Chemotherapy and Radiation Treatment: Fever, Nausea (feeling sick)



This Information Sheet offers suggestions that may help you cope with side effects during treatment for cancer.

If you are having treatment, you may not feel well. Treatment (including surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment) can cause a variety of symptoms, including fatigue (tiredness), nausea, vomiting, fever and infections. While some of these side effects are unpleasant, others can pose risks to your health and recovery.

Here are some tips for coping if you have any of these problems.

Fever and infection

This is much more common with chemotherapy than it is with radiation treatment:

A fever can be a sign that your body has an infection. Fevers can cause problems such as chills, shivering and headaches. It is important to find out the cause of the infection and get the right treatment. It is possible to have an infection without a fever—just to feel unwell. In either case, contact your doctor immediately.

If fever develops (if your temperature is 38 degrees or over) or you feel unwell, take action quickly, even with a normal temperature, don't wait to see what happens. Contact your cancer doctor or nurse and follow the advice given.

Fevers are a sign that something is wrong, and should be treated and reported. If the fever gets too high, it can cause dehydration and seizures. When someone is having chemotherapy or radiation treatment, fevers can mean an infection, which is serious and needs medical treatment straight away.

High fevers do not kill bacteria that cause infection. This is why your cancer doctor or health care team will treat both the fever and the possible infection. If your white blood cell count is low, your body will not be able to fight off the infection on its own.

Remember that the risks of getting an infection and fever do not go away as soon as treatment ends. It is important for you to ask your doctor or health care team about this.

Feeling sick (nausea) or vomiting

With radiation treatment, nausea and vomiting may happen. This depends on where in the body your treatment is given. If you're having treatment to the brain, or your throat or stomach you may feel sick.

Doctors and nurses are finding better ways to treat feeling sick (nausea) and vomiting.

If you feel sick, try some of these ideas:

- Eat lightly before each treatment.
- Eat smaller amounts more often.
- Eat slowly and chew well to help you to digest your food better.
- Eat your main meal at the time of the day when you feel best.
- Try not to eat fatty things.
- Eat dry toast or crackers—they often help.
- Drink clear, cool, and unsweetened drinks like apple juice.
- Don't do anything too strenuous after a meal, but try not to lie down for at least two hours after a meal.
- Try breathing deeply through your mouth whenever you feel like being sick.
- If cooking or cooking smells make you feel sick, ask others to cook for you, or prepare meals between treatments and freeze them.
- **Ask the cancer nurse or hospital social worker where you can learn relaxation or meditation methods.** Contact the cancer information nurses on the Cancer Information Helpline 0800 CANCER (226 237).

- **Ask your nurse or doctor to tell you when and how to take the medicine to treat your nausea (feeling sick).** If nausea (feeling sick doesn't go away, talk to your cancer nurse or Cancer Treatment Centre. Remember to keep all medications out of the reach of children. Check with your doctor or nurse whether you can drive while on this medication.
- **Get plenty of rest.** Some people find resting helps them feel less sick. Some anti-sickness medicines make you sleepy.
- **Relax and try to think about something else.** Watch TV, listen to the radio or anything else that relaxes you.
- **Wear loose-fitting clothes.** Tight clothes around the waist or neck, can make you feel sick.
- **Rinsing your mouth out can get rid of a bad taste.** Try not eat strong or spicy foods.
- **See the Cancer Society booklet *Eating well during cancer treatment/Kia pai te kai i te wā maimoatanga matepukupuku*** for more ideas to help with feeling sick. Contact your local Cancer Society or phone 0800 CANCER (226 237) to get a copy of this booklet.
- **Try taking small sips of drinks or sucking on ice cubes an hour or so after being sick.**
- **Eating crackers or toast can help.**