

# Cisplatin and radiotherapy to the head and neck

The possible benefits of this treatment vary; for some people chemotherapy may reduce the risk of the cancer coming back, for others it may control the cancer and its symptoms. Your doctor will explain to you whether you will receive chemotherapy or another type of treatment, or a combination of both. Your doctor or nurse will be happy to answer any questions you have about your treatment. You will find it useful to refer to the booklet 'Chemotherapy, a guide' which gives general information on chemotherapy and side effects.

## Your treatment

Your doctor or nurse clinician has prescribed for you a treatment that includes the chemotherapy cisplatin. This is given during week 1 and week 4 of your course of radiotherapy.

**Week 1** Cisplatin given by drip over 24 hours. It is given with a lot of fluid.

**Week 4** Cisplatin given by drip over 24 hours. It is given with a lot of fluid.

You will be seen in a **morning** clinic in the outpatients department before the start of each cycle of treatment. You will have a routine blood test. Please make sure your radiographers know about these appointments especially if you travel by hospital transport.

This treatment can have serious or possibly life-threatening side effects. It is very important that you report side effects straight away. Don't delay, if you feel unwell, please ring The Christie Hotline on **0161 446 3658**. The lines are open 24 hours a day.

## Increased risk of serious infection

You are vulnerable to infection while you are having chemotherapy. Minor infections can become life-threatening in a matter of hours if left untreated. Symptoms of infection include fever, shivering, sweats, sore throat, diarrhoea, discomfort when you pass urine, cough or breathlessness. We recommend that you use a digital thermometer so you can check your temperature. You can buy one from your local chemist.

If you feel unwell, you have symptoms of an infection or your temperature is 37.5°C or above, or below 36 °C contact The Christie Hotline straight away.



## **Anaemia (low number of red blood cells)**

While having this treatment you may become anaemic. This may make you pale and feel tired and breathless. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have these symptoms. You may need a blood transfusion.

## **Bruising or bleeding (low platelets)**

Rarely, this treatment can reduce the production of platelets, cell fragments which help the blood to clot. This means you may bruise easily or experience bleeding, such as nosebleeds or bleeding gums. If you have any of these symptoms, tell your doctor or nurse straight away. You may need a platelet transfusion.

## **Other possible side effects**

Chemotherapy can cause many different side effects. Some are more likely to occur than others. Everybody is different and not everyone gets all the side effects. Most side effects are usually temporary, but in some rare cases they can be life-threatening. It is important to tell your hospital doctor or nurse about any side effects so they can be monitored and, where possible, treated.

## **Common side effects (more than 1 in 10)**

### **• Nausea and vomiting**

Cisplatin can cause nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (being sick). This may occur immediately after the chemotherapy or about 4 to 5 days later. You will be given anti-sickness drugs before and during your chemotherapy drip. You will also be given drugs to take if you need them. If you still feel sick, please ask to see your doctor or nurse.

### **• Kidney damage**

Although you will have lots of fluid in a drip while in hospital, it is important to drink 4 to 5 pints of non-alcoholic fluid a day throughout your chemo-radiotherapy course. It is important to monitor how your kidneys are working while you have this treatment with cisplatin as the chemotherapy can damage them. You will be asked to have a special test called a GFR. This is carried out in the Nuclear Medicine Department and is a series of blood tests.

### **• Constipation**

It is very common to become constipated during chemotherapy treatment. You will be prescribed laxatives but if these are not working, please tell us.

### **• Metallic taste in your mouth**

You may have a strange or metallic taste in your mouth during treatment. Sucking a mint or other strongly flavoured sweet will help to disguise this.

### **• Lethargy**

Some people become very tired after chemotherapy. You may feel you need to rest during the day. It is important to try and do some exercise; even a walk around the block may help.

### **• Sore mouth and throat**

During radiotherapy your mouth and/or throat will become very sore. Having cisplatin chemotherapy as well will make this soreness worse. Your doctor or nurse will give you painkillers when you need them. It is important to keep your mouth clean using saltwater and sodium bicarbonate mouthwashes. You can use Difflam mouthwash four times a day but do not use Corsodyl (chlorhexidine).

## Uncommon side effects (less than 1 in 10)

- **Painful, numb fingers and toes**

Cisplatin can cause damage to the nerves in your fingers and toes. This can result in tingling, painful or numb fingers and toes. This usually occurs for a few minutes at a time and then settles. Occasionally it can be permanent so tell your doctor or nurse if you experience the problem.

- **Deafness especially to high frequency sounds and tinnitus (noises in the ears)**

This normally occurs for a few minutes at a time and then settles. Occasionally it can be permanent so tell your doctor or nurse if you experience the problem.

## Rare side effects (less than 1 in 100)

- **Occasional hair thinning**

Some hair loss may occur during treatment, including body and facial hair. It is advisable to avoid perms, colours, use of hot brushes and vigorous frequent washing that could increase hair loss. Please remember that this is a temporary side effect and your hair will grow back when your treatment is completed. Very rarely, hair loss may be permanent. If you would like an appointment with the wig service, this can be arranged for you by visiting the cancer information centre. It is a good idea to get your wig before you lose a lot of hair which you can then match to your natural colour. Ask the staff for a copy of the 'Wig fitting service at The Christie'.

The Maggie's Centre runs a Talking Heads hair loss support workshop for anyone who is anticipating or experiencing hair loss (both men and women). These sessions cover the practicalities of hair loss as well as offering support with its emotional impact. Contact Maggie's on **0161 641 4848** or email [manchester@maggiescentres.org](mailto:manchester@maggiescentres.org)

- **Blood clots (Warning!)**

There is an increased risk of blood clots in patients receiving cisplatin. This can cause a variety of symptoms depending on which blood vessel the clot is affecting. Therefore, it is very important that if you have any swelling, tenderness or pain around the calf muscle in your lower leg that you phone The Christie Hotline on **0161 446 3658** for advice. If you get sudden onset chest pain or shortness of breath then you should dial **999** immediately. If you do develop a blood clot you will need to have treatment to thin your blood and dissolve the clot. To help prevent clots, keep mobile and drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids (around 4 to 5 pints per day).

- **Extravasation**

Rarely the chemotherapy can leak out of the vein around the cannula. If you develop redness, soreness or pain at the cannula site, please let us know straight away.

## Serious and potentially life threatening side effects

In a small proportion of patients chemotherapy can result in very severe side effects which may rarely result in death. The team caring for you will discuss the risk of these side effects with you.

## Sex, contraception and fertility

**Protecting your partner and contraception:** We recommend that you or your partner use a condom during sexual intercourse while you are having the course of chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is dangerous to unborn babies and this will also protect you and your partner from any chemotherapy drugs that may be present in semen and in the vagina. If you suspect that you may be pregnant please tell your doctor immediately.

**Fertility:** This chemotherapy may affect your ability to have children. Your doctor or nurse should have discussed this with you. If not, please ask them before you start treatment.

## Late side effects

Some side effects may become evident only after a number of years. In reaching any decision with you about treatment, the potential benefit you receive from treatment will be weighed against the risks of serious long term side effects to the heart, lungs, kidneys and bone marrow. With some drugs there is also a small but definite risk of developing another cancer. If any of these problems specifically applies to you, the doctor will discuss these with you and note this on your consent form.

## Contacts

If you have any general questions or concerns about your treatment, please ring the area where you are having treatment:

Administration enquiries - **0161 918 7665**

For advice ring The Christie Hotline on - **0161 446 3658** (24 hours)

Your consultant is: .....

Your hospital number is: .....

Your key worker is: .....

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If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **patient.information@christie.nhs.uk**

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



Contact The Christie Hotline for  
urgent support and specialist advice  
**The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658**  
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week