

ALL maintenance

Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL) maintenance

The possible benefits of treatment vary; for some people this chemotherapy may reduce the risk of 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

Once you have completed your intensive chemotherapy you will start maintenance chemotherapy which consists of the following:

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| Tablets: | Dexamethasone tablets for 5 days every 28 days
(with vincristine)
Mercaptopurine (6-MP) tablets every day
Methotrexate tablets once a week |
| Intravenous: | Vincristine via an infusion (drip) given into a line (cannula) over 5 to 10 minutes once every 28 days |
| Intrathecal: | Intrathecal methotrexate once every 12 weeks. |

Although there are still some potential side effects to treatment, it is anticipated that these will be minimal and your doctor or nurse clinician may adjust your treatment according to your side effects. You will be able to return to work/college during your maintenance but you will need to attend clinic and treatment appointments. The maintenance period will last for several months or years which your doctor or nurse will discuss with you when you start your treatment.

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.



Possible side effects

Chemotherapy can cause many different side effects. Some are more likely to occur than others. Everyone 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)

- **Bruising or bleeding**

This treatment can reduce the production of platelets which help the blood clot. Tell your doctor if you have any unexplained bruising or bleeding, such as nosebleeds, bloodspots or rashes on the skin, and bleeding gums. You may need a platelet transfusion.

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

While having this treatment you may become anaemic. This may make you feel tired and breathless. Let your doctor or nurse know if these symptoms are a problem. You may need a blood transfusion. You will have a routine blood test every day while you are in hospital to monitor the effects of the chemotherapy, **but please contact The Christie if you experience any of the symptoms above.**

- **Steroid side effects**

Your **dexamethasone tablets** should be taken with food as they may cause indigestion. They may also increase your appetite. It is better to take them early in the day, for example, with breakfast and lunch, since they can make you feel more alert and prevent sleep.

These tablets can alter your mood causing you to feel low, irritable or agitated. Please tell the doctor at your next clinic if this is a problem.

Dexamethasone can cause your blood sugar to rise. If you are diabetic then you may need to increase the dose of any diabetic medication you take (insulin or tablets). You should discuss this with your doctor before starting the chemotherapy. Dexamethasone can also induce diabetes in people not known to have this disease. This is normally reversible although you may need to take some diabetic medication while you are having chemotherapy.

- **Vincristine side effects**

Vincristine may cause constipation and you may need medication (laxatives) to help you. You may feel some numbness in your fingers and toes which normally improves with time. However, your dose of chemotherapy may need adjusting so it is important that you tell your doctor or nurse if you have any of these symptoms.

Uncommon side effects (less than 1 in 10)

- **Lethargy**

Some chemotherapy may make you feel tired and lacking in energy. It can be frustrating when you feel unable to cope with routine tasks. If you do feel tired, take a rest when necessary. Gentle exercise such as walking can be beneficial.

- **Sensitivity to the sun**

This chemotherapy can make your skin more sensitive to the sun than usual. Sit in the shade, avoid too much sun and use a high factor sunblock cream.

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- **Liver disorders**

The chemotherapy may cause changes in the way your liver works. Your medical team will monitor this closely by taking blood samples from time to time to measure your liver function. If your liver is affected, we may need to alter the dose of chemotherapy.

Rare side effects (less than 1 in 100)

- **Extravasation**

Extravasation is when chemotherapy leaks outside of the vein. If you develop redness, soreness or pain at the injection site **at any time** please let us know straightaway. This is only a problem if you do not have a central line and need to get your treatment through a vein in your hand or arm.

- **Nausea and vomiting (sickness)**

The severity of this varies from person to person. Anti-sickness medication may be given along with your chemotherapy to prevent this. You may also be given anti-sickness tablets to take home. If you continue to feel or be sick, contact your GP or this hospital, because your anti-sickness medication may need to be changed or increased.

- **Sore mouth**

Your mouth may become sore or dry, or you may notice small mouth ulcers during this treatment. Drinking plenty of fluids and cleaning your teeth regularly and gently with a soft toothbrush can help to reduce the risk of this happening. We can prescribe a mouthwash to use during treatment. You can dilute this with water if your mouth is sore. Ask your doctor or nurse for further advice. There is also general mouth care information in the chemotherapy booklet. If you continue to have a sore mouth, please contact The Christie Hotline.

You may occasionally experience a strange taste, sometimes described as metallic or bitter. A strongly flavoured sweet or mint will help to disguise this.

- **Sore eyes**

You may get a dry, gritty feeling in your eyes following treatment. If this happens, using hypromellose eye-drops will help to ease the discomfort. If the problem persists contact this hospital. Your eyes may also water. This will improve in time and needs no specific treatment.

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 to you.

Sex, contraception and fertility

Protecting your partner and contraception: We recommend that you or your partner use a barrier form of contraception 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 contact the haematology team:

Haematology nurse specialists - **0161 918 8167**

Haematology and transplant day unit - **0161 446 3924**

General enquiries - **0161 446 3000**

For urgent advice ring The Christie Hotline - **0161 446 3658** (24 hours a day, 7 days a week).

Your consultant is:

Your hospital number is:

Your key worker is:

Flu vaccinations

Is it alright for me to have a flu jab during the time I'm having chemotherapy?

It's safe to have a flu jab, but depending on the sort of chemotherapy you have had, it may not give quite as much protection against infection as usual. Some patients may need 2 vaccinations. However, if you're thinking of having any other vaccinations, do check with your Christie doctor first, because some vaccines should be avoided.

COVID-19 vaccinations

We advise that all patients receive a COVID-19 vaccination when this is offered. Your doctor will discuss with you the best time to have this.

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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 **the-christie.patient.information@nhs.net**

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham, Salford or Macclesfield. 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