

# Chemotherapy Patient Information

## Breast Cancer

### Drug: Gemcitabine and Paclitaxel (Weekly)

The aim of this leaflet is to help to inform you, and those that are close to you, about the side effects that may occur with this treatment.

Your treatment			
Day	Drug(s)	How is it given?	How long will it take?
1, 8 and 15	<b>Gemcitabine</b> ( <i>gem-site-a-been</i> )	By a drip into a vein	2 hours
	<b>Paclitaxel</b> ( <i>pack-le-tax-ul</i> )		

- this treatment cycle is repeated every 28 days. Your doctor will advise you of the number of cycles you will have
- you will need to have a blood test before each treatment to check that your blood count has returned to normal. If your count is still low it may be necessary to delay your next treatment until your blood count has returned to normal. You will be told when to have these blood tests
- gemcitabine commonly causes a fever or flu like illness **within the first day or two** of having the drug, this should settle with some paracetamol. If this does not settle, or you become unwell with this fever follow the instructions below

### Important Information

#### If you:

- become unwell
- develop chills, shivers or shakes
- develop a temperature of 38°C or above
- feel short of breath
- develop chest pain

**Go to your nearest hospital emergency department immediately**

**Before your treatment with paclitaxel** you may be given a 'premedication' to help prevent you from having a reaction to the paclitaxel. **Sometimes** after the first 4 treatments with paclitaxel, if you have not had a reaction to the drug paclitaxel you may not be required to have any premedication.

#### During treatment let your nurse know immediately if you develop :-

- redness, soreness or pain around the injection site
- skin rash, itching, fever, shivers, dizziness or breathlessness

#### At home it is important to :-

- take your medications as prescribed by your doctor
- attend to your mouth care after each meal and before you go to bed
- keep a record of the side effects that have bothered you in order to report to your doctor at your next appointment
- take note of any numbness or tingling in your fingers or toes to report at your next treatment

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment and the side effects, please contact your treating team

Daytime contact.....

After hours contact.....

### Side Effects

Below is a list of some of the possible side effects of this treatment and when they are likely to occur. This is a guide only. Remember most of these side effects are temporary and can be managed. Some people have few side effects while others might have many, everyone is different. If you are unsure about any of your symptoms, contact your doctor or nurse.

**Immediate (onset hours to days)****Allergic Reaction**

Allergic reactions are uncommon but can be life threatening. You may experience skin rash, itching, fever, shiver, shakes, redness of the face, pain, dizziness, feeling anxious, wheezing and shortness of breath. If you have any of these symptoms tell your nurse or doctor **without delay**.

**Nausea and Vomiting**

Feeling sick and vomiting can occur. Take your medicine as told to you by your doctor even if you do not feel sick. If you feel sick and vomit tell your doctor or nurse. If you continue to vomit or feel light-headed go to your nearest hospital emergency department without delay. For more information ask for the **Managing Nausea and Vomiting fact sheet**.

**Changes in Sense of Smell and Taste**

Changes to taste and smell are common. Food may become bland or taste metallic. To mask the taste changes eat sugar free mints or chew sugar free gum, marinate meats in fruit juices or wine, flavour food with sauces and herbs. Using plastic forks and knives help reduce the metallic taste.

**Early (onset days to weeks)****Increased Risk of Infection**

A side effect of this treatment is a low white blood cell count, particularly affecting the type of white blood cell called neutrophils. A low neutrophil count is called neutropenia. Neutrophils are the type of white blood cell that fights infection. The lower your neutrophil count drops, the greater the risk of you developing an infection.

While your neutrophil count is low, you are at increased risk of infection. Such infections can come from bacteria (germs) that we normally carry on our skin or in our bowel. As this treatment can cause neutropenia, it is important that you monitor yourself for signs of infection and check your temperature if you are unwell.

Your blood count will be checked by your doctor at different times before and during your treatments. If your neutrophil count has not returned to normal, your doctor may delay your next treatment and/or reduce the doses of the drugs.

**If you develop a fever of 38°C or higher, have shivers, shakes or feel unwell, go to your nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance. Do not delay as this is life-threatening.**

For more information ask for the **Patient Information Sheet - Neutropenia and Infection**

**Low platelets and Increased Risk of Bleeding**

This treatment may lower the platelet count in your blood. Platelets help your blood to clot, and when low, increase the risk of bleeding and bruising. So, if you have bleeding or bruising, tell your doctor or nurse at your next appointment; however, if you have uncontrolled bleeding, go to your nearest emergency department. If your platelet count is low, you may require a platelet transfusion.

**Feeling Tired**

Fatigue is common. If you do feel tired, you may need to limit your activities and concentrate on what is most important to you. However, regular exercise each day, along with plenty of rest, has been shown to help improve fatigue.

**Painful Stiff Joints and Muscles**

You may have muscle, joint or general body pain which may occur a day or two after treatment and can last for a few days. You may require pain medication to help manage this. Contact your doctor or nurse if you need strong pain killers otherwise just tell your doctor about these symptoms at your next appointment.

**Sore Mouth**

Soreness of the mouth and sometimes mouth ulcers are possible side effects of this treatment, so it is important that you care for your mouth. Rinse your mouth after each meal and before going to bed with salty water or sodium bicarbonate mouthwash. To make the mouthwash, dissolve 1/2 teaspoon of salt OR 1 teaspoon of sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) in a glass of warm water (approximately 200 mL). Clean your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush. If you normally floss continue to

do so. Tell your doctor or nurse if you develop a sore mouth, pain on swallowing or a white coating on your tongue.

### Numbness and Tingling in Fingers and Toes

Numbness, tingling and pins and needles in your hands and feet may happen, due to the effect of the treatment on nerve function. These symptoms may affect your everyday activities, such as doing up buttons, picking up small objects and the sensation of walking. It is important to tell your doctor at your next appointment as this is an early sign of nerve damage. For more information please see **Patient Information- Chemotherapy Induced Peripheral Neuropathy**.

### Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea can occur with this treatment and may happen at any time. This can usually be managed by ensuring you have adequate fluid intake and taking loperamide (Gastrostop®) or other anti-diarrhoeal medication as required. You should, however, report what happened to your doctor or nurse at the next appointment. If your diarrhoea is not controlled and you have more than 5 loose bowel motions per day, and especially if you feel light-headed or dizzy, you should go to your nearest hospital emergency department.

### Skin Rash

Skin rash is common. Keep your skin moisturised with a gentle non perfumed moisturising cream e.g. sorbolene or aqueous cream. Do not scratch your skin. Always protect yourself from the sun, wear a hat, sunglasses, and use a broad spectrum SPF30+ sunscreen. Talk to your doctor about treatment options.

## Late (onset weeks to months)

### Low Red Blood Cell Count

This treatment can cause a low red blood cell count which may cause you to feel more tired than usual. You may feel light-headed, dizzy and appear pale. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have these symptoms as you may require a blood transfusion.

### Hair Loss

Hair loss usually starts within a few weeks of beginning treatment. It can occur on all parts of the body including the eyebrows and eyelashes. Hair loss is usually temporary. Ask the staff for information about wigs and the **Look Good Feel Better program ([www.lgfb.org.au](http://www.lgfb.org.au))** for women and men.

### Nail Damage

Your nails may grow more slowly, become darker, develop ridges or white lines and become brittle and flaky. In some cases you may lose your nails completely. In some cases painting your nails with nail polish may help prevent this. Wear gloves when gardening.

### Breathing Problems

Changes to how your lungs work can happen. If you develop changes to your breathing or a cough tell your doctor. If you become short of breath or have chest pain go to your nearest hospital emergency department. **Do not delay.**

## Delayed (onset months to years)

### Menopausal Symptoms

Chemotherapy can cause you to enter menopause. This may mean that you have irregular or no menstrual periods, vaginal dryness, hot flushes, sweating, mood changes or problems sleeping. There is still a risk of pregnancy even if your periods have stopped. You should still use birth control, until permanent menopause is confirmed. Talk to your doctor or nurse for more information.

## Frequently asked Questions

### **Do I need to take any special precautions at home while on chemotherapy?**

Chemotherapy drugs are transported via your blood stream to all parts of your body. The majority of chemotherapy drugs are excreted in your bodily fluids. It is important that you take the following precautions at home for seven days after your last chemotherapy treatment.

- flush the toilet on full flush, with the lid down, after you have used it
- keep a plastic bag handy in case you feel sick
- clothing or bed linen that is soiled with urine, bowel motions and/or vomit should be handled with disposable gloves and washed separately from other items
- if you have sex within a few days of a treatment session, you or your partner will need to use a barrier method (i.e. condoms) to protect your partner from being exposed to chemotherapy drugs

### **Will treatment affect my sex life?**

The desire to have sex may decrease as a result of the treatment or its side effects. It may help to discuss your worries with your partner and/or doctor or nurse.

### **Do I still need to use contraception?**

Pregnancy should be avoided as this treatment can have a harmful effect on an unborn baby. Talk to your doctor about suitable contraception methods.

### **Can I still breast feed?**

You must not breast feed during the entire course of your treatment, as these drugs can pass into breast milk.

### **Is it safe to take medicines, vitamins and/or herbal preparations during my treatment?**

Before starting any medicines, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, natural or herbal therapies, tell your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. Some of these medicines may interact with your treatment.

Do **not** stop taking any prescribed medicines (including low dose aspirin) without first speaking to your doctor.

### **What can I take for a headache or mild pain?**

Paracetamol is safe to take if you have a headache or other mild aches and pains. It is recommended that you avoid taking aspirin, ibuprofen and other anti-inflammatory type medications for pain while you are having treatment. If these medications have been prescribed by your doctor, do not stop taking them without first speaking with your doctor.

### **Should I be on a special diet while having treatment?**

While you are receiving this treatment it is important that you try and maintain a healthy diet. There are some foods that may cause food-borne illnesses in high risk individuals and should be avoided. For further information on foods to avoid and food hygiene please ask for a copy of the Listeria and Food brochure. If you have any concerns about recent weight loss or weight gain or questions about your diet, please ask to speak to a dietitian.

### **Can I still drink alcohol?**

It is fine to drink 1 to 2 standard drinks a day with most cancer treatments. In some cases alcohol can interfere with the way some drugs work. Your doctors and nurses giving the treatment will be able to give you specific advice about whether drinking alcohol is safe with your treatment.

### **Can I have a vaccination?**

Vaccinations such as flu and tetanus are safe to receive while you are having treatment. Live vaccines (e.g. BCG, MMR, zoster and varicella vaccines) however, should be postponed until at least 6 months after treatment. If in doubt, check with your doctor before having any vaccinations.

Your household contacts should be fully vaccinated, including having live vaccines according to the current vaccination schedule. Extra care needs to be taken with hand washing and careful disposal of soiled nappies for infants who have recently received the rotavirus vaccine.

### **How do I reduce my risk of getting an infection?**

You will be most at risk of getting an infection during the week off. During this time, you should avoid contact with people who are sick (e.g. chicken pox, flu), and minimise time spent in crowded places. This will help reduce the risk of you getting an infection.

## **Support & Information Services**

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**For telephone support**

- Cancer Council Helpline Phone 13 11 20

**For online support**

- Cancer Connections [www.cancerconnections.com.au](http://www.cancerconnections.com.au)

**For further information**

- eviQ Cancer Treatments online [www.eviQ.org.au](http://www.eviQ.org.au)
- Cancer Council Australia [www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)
- Cancer Council NSW [www.cancercouncil.com.au](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au)
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand - **Listeria & Food Safety**  
(at [www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/listeria/pages/listeriabrochuretext.aspx](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/listeria/pages/listeriabrochuretext.aspx))
- Cancer Australia [www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/breast-cancer](http://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/breast-cancer)
- Breast Cancer Network Australia [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au)
- Westmead Breast Cancer Institute [www.bci.org.au](http://www.bci.org.au)
- Australasian Menopause Society [www.menopause.org.au](http://www.menopause.org.au)

**For patient advocacy**

- Cancer Voices NSW [www.cancervoices.org.au](http://www.cancervoices.org.au)

**For support for young people living with cancer (12-24 years):**

- Canteen [www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au)
- NOWWHAT [www.nowwhat.org.au](http://www.nowwhat.org.au)

**For free workshops on caring for your hair and skin while on treatment**

- Look Good Feel Better [www.lgfb.org.au](http://www.lgfb.org.au)

**Disclaimer:** This document reflects what is currently regarded as safe practice. However, as in any patient's situation there may be factors which cannot be covered by a single set of guidelines. This document does not replace the need for the application of medical judgment to each individual case. Some of the side effects from cancer chemotherapy may only become evident after a long period of time, but many of these can be avoided with careful monitoring. Generally, the benefits of your treatment should outweigh the risks. Your doctor will discuss the specific risks of your treatment with you. Contact your cancer clinic staff or doctor if you feel your symptoms are getting worse or you are not able to manage them.

The currency of this information is guaranteed only up until the date of printing, for any updates please check [www.eviq.org.au](http://www.eviq.org.au)

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