

## High dose cytarabine

The possible benefits of treatment vary; for some people this 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 called High dose cytarabine which is a chemotherapy drug. It is also known as Ara-C.

You will be admitted to hospital for 2-3 days for this treatment. It may be given with other chemotherapy drugs on the same visit or in alternating cycles. Your doctor will advise you about which treatment you will have.

**Cytarabine (Ara-C)** given via an infusion (drip) over 1 to 3 hours. You will receive a total of 4 doses which takes 2 days to give. Each cycle lasts 21 days. You will have up to 4 cycles.

You will have a routine blood test and medical review before the start of each cycle of treatment. This is so your team can monitor and manage any side effects as well as assess your response to treatment. Occasionally we may not be able to go ahead with your treatment until your blood counts are back to a safe level. If this happens, your chemotherapy may be delayed a week.

- **If you are taking any other medicines:** It is important to tell the doctor if you are taking medicine for any other condition. Some medicines can react with your treatment, especially blood pressure medication. So always tell your doctor at every visit about any other medicines or tablets you are taking.

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 as this treatment can cause low white blood cells and/or low antibody levels. 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 to check your temperature. You can buy one from your local pharmacy.

**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.

## Tumour lysis syndrome

This treatment may cause the rapid breakdown of lymphoma cells, which may lead to abnormalities in the blood. This problem is more likely if you have a lot of disease or if your kidneys do not work as well as they should do. Your doctor will tell you if you are at risk. You may be given a kidney-protective medicine called allopurinol for the first cycle of treatment, and your doctor may do additional blood tests to monitor this side effect. We sometimes admit patients for the first treatment to give intravenous fluids and kidney-protective medication and twice daily monitoring of blood tests for 48 hours.

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

### • Bruising or bleeding

This treatment can reduce the production of platelets which help the blood clot. Let your doctor know 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.

### • Nausea and vomiting (sickness)

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

### • Diarrhoea

If you experience diarrhoea while you are having treatment, anti-diarrhoea medication can be bought from a pharmacy or prescribed by your GP for a temporary period until this is resolved. If the problem persists contact The Christie. Ask the staff for a copy of 'Eating - help yourself' which has some useful ideas about diet when you are having treatment.

### • 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 for you 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.

Occasionally during treatment you may experience a **strange taste**, sometimes described as metallic or bitter. A strongly flavoured sweet or mint will help to disguise this.

### • Hair loss

Hair loss is usually total. The hair falls out gradually 10 to 14 days following your first course of treatment. The time scale varies from person to person. Please remember that this is a temporary side effect and your hair will grow back when your treatment is completed. Very rarely, hair loss can be permanent. If you would like an appointment with the wig service, this can be arranged for you by

visiting the cancer information centre, or call **0161 446 8100**. Ask the staff for a copy of the 'Wig fitting service'.

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) to arrange an appointment.

- **Changes to kidney function**

Cytarabine can cause changes to your kidney function. Your kidney function will be monitored with your routine blood tests. Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Contact your doctor or nurse if you notice any changes to the frequency you pass urine or if you notice any blood in your urine.

- **Sore eyes**

Cytarabine can commonly cause sticky or sore eyes. We will give you dexamethasone eye drops to help prevent this. Do not wear contact lenses while you are having this treatment. Please let your nurse or doctor know if your eyes feel uncomfortable.

- **Lethargy/flu-like symptoms/fever**

Cytarabine 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 rest when necessary. Gentle exercise such as walking can be beneficial.

- **Skin reddening/rash**

Your skin may become reddened, itchy or you may develop a rash. Let your doctor or nurse know if you experience any of these symptoms.

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

- **Nervous system changes**

This treatment can cause a reduced level of consciousness, drowsiness or slurred speech. Contact The Christie Hotline without delay if you experience any of these symptoms.

- **Infusion related fever, muscular aches and rash**

Cytarabine can sometimes cause a syndrome that can result in some or all of the following: fever, weakness and aching in your muscles and bones, a rash and pain in the chest. This will not affect everyone and will disappear soon after stopping the cytarabine infusion. It can also occur 6 to 12 hours after a cytarabine infusion. Inform your doctor if you experience any of these side effects. Steroids can help to prevent this happening with further cytarabine infusions.

- **Lung changes (Warning!)**

Cytarabine may cause changes to your lung tissue. Report any cough or breathlessness to your doctor without delay.

- **Liver disorders**

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

- **Bowel inflammation (colitis)**

The treatment can cause inflammation or ulcers in your bowel which may be painful and can lead to serious infection of the bowel and potentially the lining on the inside of your abdomen (peritonitis). If

you notice any blood when passing stools or you develop pain in your abdomen (tummy) please let the doctor or nurse know.

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

### • Skin changes

Sometimes as a result of the chemotherapy, your skin may appear darker in colour or lightly tanned, especially around the joints. This is known as hyperpigmentation. The skin will return to normal when treatment is finished. Some chemotherapy can make your skin more sensitive to the sun than usual. Sit in the shade, avoid too much sun and use a sunblock cream. Asian and African-Caribbean people may develop noticeable light patches on their skin.

## 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 risks 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 such as cyclophosphamide there is also a small but definite risk of an increased chance 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:

Haematology day unit - **0161 446 3924**

Lymphoma clinical nurse specialists - **0161 446 9573**

Lymphoma secretaries -

**0161 446 3753** - Professor Radford/Dr Linton/Dr Phillips/Dr Broadbent

**0161 446 8574** - Professor Illidge

**0161 446 3333** - Dr Hague/Dr Chan

**0161 446 3302** - Dr Harris

**0161 446 3869** - Professor Bloor

Palatine treatment ward - **0161 446 3925**

General enquiries - **0161 446 3000**

Your consultant is: .....

Your hospital number is: .....

Your key worker is: .....

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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