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# Capecitabine and irinotecan chemotherapy for bowel cancer

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**GI Unit**

**Patient Information**



**NHS**



## Introduction

Your doctors have suggested that you may benefit from a course of capecitabine and irinotecan chemotherapy treatment. They have weighed the expected benefits in terms of controlling the cancer and its symptoms, against the possibility of side effects. Your doctor will have discussed these with you.

Although this treatment may result in the cancer shrinking and/or prolonging your life, it is unlikely to get rid of the cancer entirely. However, the benefits you may receive from treatment may last for some time. It is not possible to predict, before you start treatment, how your cancer will respond or for how long treatment will be beneficial. If you are still unsure about the benefits, then please ask. This leaflet explains what you can expect from the chemotherapy you will receive.

## Treatment plan

**Irinotecan** is given by injection into a vein (usually on the hand or forearm) over 60 minutes once every three weeks. You will be given the injection on a single visit as an outpatient. A new cannula will be placed in your arm before each dose of chemotherapy and will remain there only while that chemotherapy is being given. The doctors in clinic will see you and you will have your blood tested before each cycle of chemotherapy. Treatment may be delayed if your blood count is not at a suitable level.

**Capecitabine** is a tablet form of chemotherapy. You will need to take the tablets twice a day, after meals, on 14 consecutive days. This is followed by a one week rest period.

Each chemotherapy treatment and following rest period over three weeks is called a cycle.

The treatment is usually given over a period of six months. You will also have a CT scan between nine and 12 weeks. The review of your CT scan and response will be discussed with you by the doctor at your next clinic/treatment appointment.

If the CT scan shows that your tumour is not responding, this treatment will stop and your doctor will discuss further treatment options with you.

## DPD testing before treatment

Before starting this treatment, you should have a blood test to check whether you have low levels of dihydropyrimidine dehydrogenase (DPD). This is called DPD deficiency.

People who have low DPD levels could make the side effects of certain chemotherapy drugs worse and this could develop into serious or life-threatening side effects. These group of drugs are called fluoropyrimidines such as fluorouracil (5FU) and capecitabine.

You will not know if you have DPD deficiency without a test, as there are no symptoms. You can talk to your cancer doctor about your risk of having DPD deficiency before you start treatment.

## Side effects

All drugs can have some side effects and this includes capecitabine and irinotecan chemotherapy. These vary and for some people they may not occur.

The more common side effects are:

- **Low blood count** – chemotherapy temporarily reduces the rate at which blood cells are produced in your bone marrow.

This may cause:

- anaemia (low red cell count) – you may need blood transfusions
- neutropenia (low white cell count), which may increase your risk of developing an infection
- thrombocytopenia (low platelet count), which may increase your tendency to bruising and bleeding – you may need platelet transfusions.

**If you feel unwell at any time or have a temperature (37.5°C / 99.5°F or higher), you should contact the hospital immediately** as you may need to be admitted for intravenous antibiotics. For further information, please refer to The Royal Marsden booklet *Chemotherapy; your questions answered*.

- **Nausea and vomiting** – chemotherapy sometimes causes this. It can usually be managed with anti-sickness (anti-emetic) drugs.
- **Increased sweating, production of saliva, watery eyes, stomach cramps and diarrhoea during the infusion** – this collection of side effects is known as ‘acute cholinergic syndrome’. These symptoms are caused by a chemical called acetylcholine, which irinotecan stimulates the body to produce. We will give you an injection of atropine under the skin before the irinotecan is given to reduce them. A further injection can be given if you experience any of these symptoms during or after the infusion.
- **Diarrhoea** – a few days after irinotecan, you may develop severe diarrhoea. You will be given medication for this and you need to follow these instructions:
  - Take loperamide 4mg after the first loose stool followed by loperamide 2mg every loose stool. Continue for 12 hours after the last loose stool.
  - If you are still having diarrhoea after 24 hours, start taking ciprofloxacin 250mg tablets, twice a day for seven days after you have been advised to do so by the hospital doctor. You should not take loperamide for longer than 48 hours.

Please contact the hospital for advice as soon as diarrhoea starts. If it continues beyond 48 hours or you also have a fever or nausea or vomiting, then you may need to be admitted to hospital. You may become dehydrated if you have a lot of diarrhoea and need intravenous fluids.

- **Soreness and redness of hands and feet (palmar-plantar syndrome)** – capecitabine can cause this. You may find that the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet become sore and red or dark. The skin may become dry, itchy and peel. A moisturiser, such as an emollient cream, will help prevent dryness. Please tell your doctor or nurse if this becomes a problem, as they may temporarily stop the capecitabine tablets.
- **Tiredness and lethargy** – during your chemotherapy, you may become tired more easily after normal activities. This is quite normal and usually occurs with all types of chemotherapy. Your tiredness should resolve in time.
- **Sore mouth and mouth ulcers** – keep your mouth clean and healthy by drinking plenty of fluids and carrying out good oral hygiene. If you develop a sore mouth, we can prescribe mouthwash to help with this.
- **Taste changes** – you may find taste changes affect your appetite. However, it is important to make sure you drink plenty of fluids, at least 10 glasses or cups a day, and eat well.
- **Hair loss (alopecia)** – temporary hair loss usually happens. It can occur on all parts of the body, including the head, face, arms and legs, underarms, and pubic area. You may wish to ask for information on wigs. For further information, please refer to the Macmillan booklet *Coping with hair loss*.

**The less common side effects are:**

- **Sore eyes** – we can prescribe eye drops to soothe your eyes and decrease the irritation.
- **Chest pain** – patients receiving capecitabine have reported episodes of chest pain, discomfort or a feeling of tightness or heaviness across the centre of the chest and/or palpitations (a sensation of a racing and irregular heartbeat).

These symptoms may occur suddenly and the duration can vary. Sometimes they resolve within minutes although they may last for longer. The chest pain is caused by a temporary narrowing of the blood vessels supplying the heart. This is reversible once the chemotherapy is stopped. This type of chest pain has the similar symptoms as angina and can lead to a heart attack. It may be common in people with a history of heart disease, but can occur in anyone. Always let your doctor know if you have a history of problems with your heart.

There are many different causes of chest pain, most of which are unrelated to the chemotherapy. If you develop any of these symptoms, you should stop taking these tablets and go **immediately** to your nearest accident and emergency department and take this leaflet with you. Please inform your team or call The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline.

- Very rarely you may develop a **severe skin reaction**. If you experience tender red skin patches which then blister, please stop your capecitabine and seek urgent medical advice. The skin changes may follow symptoms such as fever, chest symptoms and a need to squint or close your eyes, which is worse in bright light (photophobia). These symptoms may be caused by conditions called Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis (TEN) and Stevens Johnson Syndrome (SJS) and if so, these require urgent treatment.

It is important that you inform your doctor at your next hospital visit, if you experience any of these side effects. With certain side effects, a treatment break or dose reduction may be necessary. If you have any concerns regarding these side effects, you may contact your hospital team at The Royal Marsden (see contact details on page 8).

## Fertility, pregnancy and breastfeeding

- **Fertility** – chemotherapy can damage the testis or ovary. This may affect your ability to conceive (or father a child). Infertility can be temporary or permanent. Sometimes, in women, chemotherapy can lead to premature menopause. If relevant to you, you may wish to discuss the issue of fertility with your doctor before treatment is started.
- **Pregnancy** – during chemotherapy and for up to a year afterwards, if sperm or eggs are produced they may be abnormal. Treatment can also harm an unborn child. We recommend that you or your partner use a barrier method of contraception (such as condoms) during treatment and for one year afterwards. If you know you are pregnant before starting treatment or become pregnant during treatment, you must tell your doctor immediately.
- **Breastfeeding** – there is a risk of harm to a child who is being breastfed since the drug may be concentrated in the milk. It is very important that women do not breastfeed while receiving chemotherapy.

## Blood clots

Some cancers increase the risk of developing blood clots. Chemotherapy drugs can also cause an increase in the risk of patients developing blood clots whilst they are on treatment. The most common place for blood clots to form is in the calf. This is called a deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and causes the leg to swell. If a part of the clot breaks free, it may travel to the lungs, causing shortness of breath or chest pain. This is called a pulmonary embolus (PE).

Blood clots can be life threatening and treatment with blood-thinning drugs (anti-coagulants) is usually given to help ‘dissolve’ the clot and prevent further problems. Please inform your doctor immediately if you are worried you may have a blood clot.



Airline travel is also associated with an increased risk of blood clots. It is important that you inform your hospital team of any travel plans whilst you are on treatment.

We have listed the most common side effects of this chemotherapy. You may experience some or several of these side effects listed above and they may be mild, moderate or severe. Some can occasionally be life-threatening or lead to death and occur in 0.5-5% of cases (less than one in 100 people). All side effects will be discussed with you, however please raise any questions that you may have with your medical team or Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS).

As with all drugs, there may be other side effects not mentioned here that you may experience. Because of the risk of side effects, it is important that you:

- **Always** tell your doctor if you suffer from any of these side effects, or if you have experienced any new symptoms since your last visit. Your doctor can help you by giving you medication or advice, to reduce or stop these side effects from occurring in the future.
- **Always** tell your doctor about any other medicine you are taking or planning to take, including herbal and complementary therapies.
- **Always** consult your doctor before having any other procedure, for example, dental work or vaccinations.



## References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre

Telephone: Chelsea 020 7811 8438 / 020 7808 2083

Sutton 020 8661 3759 / 3951

Email: [patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk](mailto:patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk)

No conflicts of interest were declared in the production of this booklet.

Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.

The patient information service is generously supported by The Royal Marsden Charity.

[royalmarsden.org](http://royalmarsden.org)

Registered Charity No.1095197



Revised February 2023. Planned review February 2026  
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Radiotherapy and  
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