

*The* ROYAL MARSDEN

NHS Foundation Trust

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# Epirubicin, cisplatin and capecitabine (ECX) chemotherapy for oesophago-gastric cancer

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**GI Unit**

**Patient Information**



**NHS**



## Introduction

Your doctors have suggested that you may benefit from a course of epirubicin, cisplatin and capecitabine 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. 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

**Epirubicin** is a chemotherapy drug that is given as an injection through a cannula (thin tube) in your arm. The injection is given during an outpatient visit and will be repeated every three weeks (one cycle).

**Cisplatin** is a chemotherapy drug. It is given as an intravenous infusion (drip) through a cannula in your arm, over five to six hours. The infusion is also given during an outpatient visit and will be repeated every three weeks. You will also be asked to drink 500mls of water (about one pint) after your treatment and a further three litres of fluid over the next 24 hours.

It is possible you may need to have a central venous access device for the epirubicin and cisplatin to be given into one of your larger veins for this treatment. Please see The Royal Marsden booklet *Central venous access devices* for further information.

**Capecitabine** is a tablet form of chemotherapy. This is taken together with the epirubicin and cisplatin chemotherapy. You will need to take the tablets twice a day after meals, for 21 consecutive days following each epirubicin and cisplatin treatment.

The treatment is repeated every three weeks. We would usually give treatment for more than 12 weeks. Each three week period is called a cycle. 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.

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 to the treatment, this treatment will stop and your doctor will discuss further treatment options with you.

**If you are taking warfarin** (a tablet for thinning the blood), you must tell your doctor before you start taking the capecitabine tablets.

**If you take an antacid** (medicine for heartburn), please tell your doctor. If it contains aluminium hydroxide, this will interfere with the absorption of the capecitabine.

## 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 epirubicin, cisplatin and capecitabine chemotherapy. These vary and for some people they may not occur.

The more common side effects are:

- **Hair loss/thinning** - this usually begins three to four weeks after your first treatment with epirubicin. We will offer you a procedure called scalp cooling to try to prevent or reduce hair loss, which can be quite uncomfortable. If you choose not to have scalp cooling or it is unsuccessful, you can be fitted for a wig at the hospital. You may also have thinning and loss of eyelashes, eyebrows and other body hair. Your hair will regrow after treatment is completed. For further information, please refer to the Macmillan booklet *Coping with hair loss*.
- **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*.

- **Effects on sensation (peripheral neuropathy)** – a feeling of tingling (pins and needles) or a loss of feeling (numbness) in the hands and feet. If you develop persistent changes, then the cisplatin may need to be stopped. This will usually resolve over a few months once the cisplatin is stopped but can be permanent.
- **Effects on hearing** - you may develop ringing in your ears (tinnitus) and your hearing can be affected, especially by high-pitched sounds. This usually improves once the cisplatin is stopped although it can be permanent.

Please inform the doctor if you notice any hearing loss or tinnitus.

- **Allergic reaction** – this can be associated with skin rash, itching and fever, shivering, headache, dizziness or redness of face. You will be monitored during the infusion. Please tell the doctor if you experience any symptoms.
- **Diarrhoea** – it is important that you inform the hospital team if you develop significant diarrhoea (more than four times in 24 hours). They may advise you to take anti-diarrhoeal medication or temporarily stop the capecitabine tablets. It is usually easy to control. Make sure that you drink plenty of fluids.
- **Nausea and vomiting** – chemotherapy sometimes causes this. It can usually be managed with anti-sickness (anti-emetic) drugs.
- **Soreness and redness of the 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 simple 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.
- **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.
- **Tiredness and lethargy** – during your chemotherapy, you may become very tired a few days following treatment. Pace yourself and rest as necessary.
- **Increased production of tears** – this is temporary. If your eyes become sore or inflamed (conjunctivitis) the doctor may prescribe some eye drops.

- **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.
- **Discoloured urine** - your urine may become a pink-red colour after your treatment, for up to a day after you have had treatment. This is due to the colour of the epirubicin and is entirely normal.

**The less common side effects are:**

**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 is called angina and can lead to a heart attack. It may be more 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 contact your hospital doctor for advice. Stop taking capecitabine until you are told otherwise. If you cannot contact The Royal Marsden, then you should go immediately to your nearest accident and emergency department and take this leaflet with you.

- **Damage to the heart muscle** – this has been reported in patients receiving high doses of epirubicin, but it would be very uncommon with the dose that you will be receiving.

- **Damage to the kidneys** - this is generally mild and unlikely to cause you any symptoms, but rarely, the kidneys can be permanently damaged. Your kidney function will be checked by a blood test before each treatment and the cisplatin will be stopped if the blood test shows signs of kidney damage.
- 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 the hospital (see contact details on page 9).

## 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.

## Contact details

Please contact us if you have any concerns or queries:

### Sutton

Medical Day Unit	020 8661 3174 (NHS patients)
Medical Day Unit	020 8661 6670 (Private patients)
Clinical Nurse Specialist/Key Worker	

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Tel: .....

### Chelsea

Medical Day Unit	020 7808 2325 / 2320 (NHS patients)
Medical Day Unit	020 7811 8092 (Private patients)
Clinical Nurse Specialist/Key Worker	

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Tel: .....

**Pharmacy Medicines Helpline:** via the Hotline below  
(Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm):

or

Email: [medicines.information@rmh.nhs.uk](mailto:medicines.information@rmh.nhs.uk) giving full details of your enquiry and a contact telephone number.

Alternatively, please call:

**The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline:** 020 8915 6899  
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

## Notes and questions

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## 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)

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

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

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