

The ROYAL MARSDEN

NHS Foundation Trust

5 fluorouracil and oxaliplatin (FOLFOX) chemotherapy after surgery for bowel cancer

GI Unit

Patient Information



NHS

Introduction

Your doctors have suggested that you may benefit from a course of oxaliplatin and fluorouracil chemotherapy treatment following your surgery. The chemotherapy will help lower the risk of cancer coming back in the future. They have weighed the expected benefits, in terms of prolonging your life, 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

The treatment consists of a combination of three drugs – oxaliplatin, fluorouracil and folinic acid.

Oxaliplatin is given as an infusion into a vein over 2–4 hours once every two weeks.

5 fluorouracil (5FU) is given as an initial injection followed by an infusion into a vein over 46 hours.

Folinic acid increases the effectiveness of 5FU and is given as an injection before the 5FU.

You will need to have a central venous access device so that the chemotherapy can be given into one of your larger veins. This may be a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC) or a special type of venous access port that can be placed under the skin (portacath). Your team will discuss the access device with you. Please see The Royal Marsden booklet *Central venous access devices* for further information. It will be connected to a pump which drips in the 5FU continuously over 46 hours. The pump is small enough to be worn on a belt and is quite easy to use. One of the specialist nurses will teach you how to manage your pump and chemotherapy infusion while you are at home.

The treatment is repeated every two weeks for six months. Each two 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.

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 oxaliplatin and 5FU 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*.

- **Effects on sensation (sensory neuropathy)** – oxaliplatin can cause:
 - a feeling of tingling (pins and needles) or a loss of feeling (numbness) in the hands and feet, especially in the case of cold exposure. This may last up to seven days.
 - an unusual feeling of numbness of the mouth and throat that may cause difficulty in swallowing and breathing problems (laryngeal spasm). It can be very frightening but is a temporary side effect. It can be made worse by cold water or other drinks so it is best to avoid them for a few days after the treatment.

If you develop persistent sensory changes then your dose of oxaliplatin may need to be reduced or stopped.

- **Allergic reaction** – can be associated with skin rash, itching and fever, shivering, dizziness, redness of face or headache. We will monitor you during the infusion. Please tell the doctor if you experience any symptoms.
- **Arm pain** – oxaliplatin can cause pain, redness or swelling in the arm as it is being given. You must report any pain experienced while receiving this chemotherapy.
- **Nausea and vomiting** – chemotherapy sometimes causes this. It can usually be managed with anti-sickness (anti-emetic) drugs.
- **Hair thinning** – temporary hair thinning usually happens. It can occur on all parts of the body, including the head, face, arms and legs, underarms, and pubic area.

- **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 medications. It is usually easy to control. Make sure that you drink plenty of fluids.
- **Sore mouth** – 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.
- **Changes in the way your liver works** – oxaliplatin can cause this to happen. This is temporary and unlikely to cause you any symptoms. Your doctors will monitor this carefully using blood tests. You may need to stop the treatment temporarily.
- **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.
- **Soreness and redness of the hands and feet (palmar-plantar syndrome)** – 5FU 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. Tell your doctor or nurse if this becomes a problem.

The less common side effects are:

- **Chest pain** – patients receiving 5FU 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 go immediately to your nearest accident and emergency department and take this leaflet with you. Afterwards, you should contact a member of your hospital team at The Royal Marsden.

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 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.

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 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 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

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.

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