The ROYAL MARSDEN
NHS Foundation Trust

Paclitaxel chemotherapy for advanced oesophageal or stomach cancer

GI Unit

Patient Information

NHS

Introduction

Your doctors have suggested that you may benefit from a course of paclitaxel 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

Paclitaxel is a chemotherapy drug given by infusion (drip) into a vein (usually on the hand or forearm) over 60 minutes. It is given during an outpatient visit on days 1, 8 and 15 of a four week period called a cycle.

A new cannula (fine tube) will be placed in your arm before each dose of chemotherapy and will remain there only while that chemotherapy is being given. It is possible you may need to have a central venous access device for the 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.

The doctors in clinic will see you and have your blood tested before each cycle of chemotherapy. Treatment may be delayed if your blood count is not at a suitable level.

The treatment is usually given over a period of six months. You will also have a CT scan every 12 weeks. The doctors will examine the scans and blood test results to assess how you are responding to the treatment. 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.

Side effects

All drugs can have some side effects and this includes paclitaxel 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.
- **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. Please speak to your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) if you would like

information on how to get a wig. For further information on hair loss, please refer to the Macmillan booklet *Coping with hair loss*.

- **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 - it is usually easy to control. Make sure that you drink plenty of fluids.
- **Tiredness or lethargy** – during your chemotherapy, you may become very tired a few days following treatment. Pace yourself and rest as necessary.
- **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.
- **Skin and nails** – paclitaxel can cause a rash, which may be red and itchy. The doctor can prescribe medication to help with this. Discoloration of the nails can also develop, but usually resolves at the end of treatment.
- **Allergic reaction –** this can be associated with skin rash, itching and fever, shivering, headache, dizziness, redness or swelling of the face. We will give you dexamethasone (a steroid) to reduce the chance of this happening and will monitor you during the infusion. Please tell the doctor if you experience any symptoms.
- **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 paclitaxel may need to be stopped. This will usually resolve over a few months once the paclitaxel is stopped but can be permanent.

- **Tissue damage (extravasation)** – this can happen if paclitaxel leaks out of the vein and into surrounding tissue. This may result in pain and take time to heal. If you notice any burning or stinging while you are receiving the chemotherapy or if the site becomes red or swollen at any time, tell the nurse or doctor immediately.
- **Muscle and/or joint pain –** Tell your doctor if this happens so they can prescribe painkillers. Try to get plenty of rest - taking warm baths may help**.**

Less common side effects are:

- **Changes to your lungs** – this can be serious. If you have an irritating cough or are regularly short of breath, you should contact your doctor.
- **Changes in the way your liver works** – paclitaxel 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.

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, please contact the hospital (see contact details on page 7).

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 commonest 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 occurs 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)
Kennaway Ward	020 8661 3128 (NHS patients)
Robert Tiffany Ward	020 8661 3944 (Private patients)

Clinical Nurse Specialist/Key Worker

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Tel: ……………………………………………..……..

Chelsea

Medical Day Unit	020 7808 2325 (NHS patients)
Burdett Coutts Ward	020 7808 2370 (NHS patients)
Private Patient Day Unit	020 7808 8092 (Private patients)
Granard House 1	020 7808 2973 (Private patients)
Granard House 2	020 7808 2362 (Private patients)

Clinical Nurse Specialist/Key Worker

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Tel: ………………………………………………..

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline: 020 8770 3821
(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)

Call us straight away if you are feeling unwell or are worried about the side effects of cancer treatments.

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
Freephone: 0800 783 7176
Email: patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk

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

The Royal Marsden Cancer Charity

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