



Breast Cancer: Getting through Chemotherapy...Tips from Survivors¹

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You and your doctor have decided that chemotherapy is an appropriate and important part of your treatment for breast cancer. No doubt you have heard stories of how other cancer patients tolerated chemotherapy and you may wonder how your experience will compare. Chemotherapy is a catch-all term for a variety of different drugs that are used for many different cancers and individuals can respond differently to the same treatment, so some of what you have heard is probably irrelevant for your situation.

There is a place for survivor stories, however. The experiences of other women who have had doxorubicin (Adriamycin[®]), cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan[®]), docetaxel (Taxotere[®]), and other treatments for breast cancer can help you know the range of reactions that are normal. Based on their experiences, survivors can offer tips to help you deal with potential side effects and bounce back after each treatment.

Women from the Gainesville Breast Cancer Support Group have offered the following tips to help you get through your chemotherapy treatments.

Because everyone is different, you will find a range of ideas offered in this fact sheet. Keep in mind that *these are personal suggestions and not medical advice*. However, they may be useful in helping you decide what specific questions to ask of your oncologist.

Food and Drink

The drugs I took kept me from throwing up, but my stomach was upset for at least a week after each treatment. I ate a lot of toast and melted cheese, canned fruit, and soup. My mouth was very sensitive to salt, so I couldn't eat most crackers or chips. I finally found crackers in the health food section of my grocery store that didn't have much salt, and they tasted good.

I remember eating ginger cookies, crystallized ginger, and ginger tea. They helped calm my stomach.

Tuna melts and refried beans saw me through many days when nothing else tasted good. Anything sweet usually was awful.

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I drank flavored water that was full of electrolytes and vitamins.

One of the things I dreaded with each treatment was the sluggish bowels. I started taking a stool softener and that seemed to help. I would start a day or two before my treatment and force myself to drink as many fluids as possible.

I was thirsty all the time. I carried water with me everywhere.

Mouth Care

I bought a child's soft toothbrush because I didn't want to hurt my gums when I brushed my teeth.

My regular toothpaste was too strong – it burned my mouth. I switched to a really mild toothpaste.

Mouth sores were a big problem for me. I used an over-the-counter treatment and a prescribed mouthwash that my doctor recommended. Ultimately the mouth sores just seemed to have to run their course.

My throat was very swollen. I ate a lot of fruit and soft foods. After checking with my oncologist I was able to obtain medications that could be chewed or that melted in my mouth.

Mental and Physical Energy

I could feel my brain sinking into oblivion on the day after each treatment. I didn't even have the energy to read or watch a movie. I remember sitting on the porch and watching lizards on the screen. It seemed like the only thing to do. After a few days I would be able to read, and after a few more days I even felt like working.

I took a lot of walks. It was helpful to keep moving, to stretch my arm, and to try to walk farther each day as my energy came back.

I went back to work as soon as I could, because staying home made me feel sicker. But now that I look back on it, I'm not sure about the quality of the work I did. I think my brain was only half there, and that half was slow!

I spent at least a week in bed, flat on my back after each treatment. I was thankful just to be able to sit up before the next one.

Attitude

I began treatments feeling like a fighter. I wanted to be tough and victorious. What I didn't quite realize is I was fighting the chemotherapy, not the cancer! I soon realized that winning this game means working with the chemicals and drugs, and allowing them to fight for me. Once I accepted this new perspective, I took whatever drug promised to improve my condition and tried to float through treatments. It got much easier after that.

I kept telling myself, "It could be worse." And I believed it. Still do.

I was totally unprepared for the number of drugs I took to cope with the side effects of chemotherapy. I took drugs for nausea, acid stomach, diarrhea, constipation, sleeplessness, hemorrhoids, and yeast infection—sometimes all in the same week! I was surprised how much of my body was affected by the chemotherapy, and simply amazed to see those systems returned to normal. Our bodies are pretty special.

I wore the same clothes to each treatment so I could ceremoniously burn them when I was through. I wanted to be able to do something to cleanse my life of the memory.

I used visualization during chemotherapy treatments to help give my body a boost. The typical visions of platoons of little men, or a clone army from Star Wars didn't appeal to me, but I could imagine zillions of hummingbirds stabbing cancer cells and buzzing off to find another one. I think it is important to find an analogy that has meaning to you. A friend of mine used her chickens. She said they are always scratching, looking for something to devour. And they are very focused.

There's not much you have control over during treatments except your attitude. Sometimes you can't even change that, but try to look for the positive in the experience. Nothing is all good or all bad.

I could feel the chemo drugs enter my body and my mind start to fog. I was almost oblivious by the end of my treatment and needed help to the car.

Emotions

Be aware that treatments can affect your mental outlook while working on your physical body. These are strong drugs and can upset your emotional balance at times. Once each cycle, I would drop into a dark, depressed state and feel totally alone and abandoned. This could be followed by euphoria or a sublime nature. I loved everyone and everything. My radiation oncologist explained that long-term treatments can deplete the body's neurotransmitters, which can lead to depression. Just understanding that helped me. For a while I felt like I was going crazy!

Friends

People wanted me to tell them what they could do to help me and I didn't have a good idea. It was nice when they brought food, especially small frozen packages. It was great to find cards in the mailbox. I wasn't always up for phone calls and visits, but that was just within the first week of each treatment. After that I was good for almost anything. I got a bunch of packets of bath salts—so I took baths!

*I have often advised chemo patients to call friends for help. People don't know what to offer to do, so please be open with them and **ask for whatever you need**. Friends are more than willing to drive for appointments or whatever is needed. They can drop you off, wait to see that treatment is started, and they can return when the time of treatment has passed.*

Sex

Vaginal dryness can be a problem during and after treatments. This can interfere with your ability to enjoy intercourse. Discuss this with your doctor if you feel comfortable doing so. There are many products that can help to alleviate the situation. I tried a lot of lubricants and finally settled on one that worked for me. I also used a prescribed internal estrogen ring since my tumor was ER negative, and that really helped.

Family

I was fortunate to have an oncology team that incorporated a unique idea from which I believe I profited. Before chemotherapy started, the patient and her adult family are scheduled for an hour (or more) appointment with an oncology nurse. Subjects covered are what to expect; medications, effects and side effects; what can be done about side effects (there is always something to help); where and how they are given; time involved in treatments; all the physical hows and whys; and when to call a doctor. This is important because there is always a doctor on call who is able to help and you have the feeling of help being a phone call away. I always felt free to call about anything. It was good to have my family at the meeting for support as well as learning. You may be feeling overwhelmed, and they will think of questions to ask that you might not think about. This procedure also gives the patient more confidence when entering into this momentous procedure.

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