

HOW WILL MY TREATMENT MAKE ME FEEL?

There's no point tiptoeing around it – getting through treatment can be tough. Not everyone has a rough time with side effects though, and there are loads of things that you and your medical team can do to help you feel better.

Will I experience side effects of cancer treatment?

Everyone reacts differently to treatment, so it's hard to say how you might feel. Some people might struggle, while others sail through.

Your team may give you medication before side effects kick in. But if you're finding it hard to cope at any point, tell your doctor or nurse so they can respond quickly.

Working and studying through treatment

If you're planning to work or study during treatment, your employer or the place where you study has a legal duty to put 'reasonable adjustments' in place to make life easier for you. This could be more time in exams or flexible working hours. This goes for when you've finished treatment too. You can find lots of information about how to manage a work/study balance on treatment at clicsargent.org.uk

What are common side effects?

Hair loss

Let's start with the big one. Hair might form a big part of your identity. So losing it or dealing with changes can be very hard, even traumatic, for some people. It's absolutely normal to be even more worried about losing your hair than the cancer itself – don't feel bad if that's how you feel. Very few of us feel comfortable standing out in the crowd and not looking your 'normal' self could make you feel self-conscious.

What we can promise is there is a ton of support out there and loads that you and your team can do. If you want to keep looking like you, you could find a wig to match your current style. Equally, some people find that taking control and owning a new look makes them feel more empowered. Some people like to shave their head before treatment starts so it's on their terms. You could experiment with wigs and scarves, try bolder make up and jewellery or get a henna crown (check with your consultant or nurse first!).

"I used to have really nice, long hair but it all started falling out. That made me feel really sad."

Anais, who had a brain tumour when she was 16

We suggest that you:

- Ask about it before your treatment starts so you know what to expect.
- Prepare for your hair to fall out, instead of waiting for it to happen. Take a sample of your hair before it falls out so you can match a wig to it, or you could just try a completely different colour. Make sure whatever you decide to do makes you feel empowered and confident.
- Explore makeup options if you lose your eyebrows and lashes – staff at makeup counters can find products that work for you and show you how to use them. YouTube tutorials might also inspire your creativity!
- Ask your nurse about services that can help you find wigs or choose hats and scarves. You can treat real hair wigs like you would your normal hair which means shampooing, blow-drying, curling and straightening are all good. Synthetic wigs are supposedly better for shorter styles.
- Ask your medical team about if you qualify for a free NHS wig and how to get hold of one. If you're in Wales or Northern Ireland, then wigs are free for all.
- Visit a salon which offers special programmes for people having cancer treatment to help you look and feel your best.
- Consider something called 'scalp cooling' to try and slow down hair loss when you're having chemotherapy. It's when you wear a cap filled with a refrigerated gel, or that's connected to a refrigeration machine. Ask your care team if this is an option for you.

When your hair grows back, it might be curlier, finer, or a different colour. If you've had radiotherapy, there might be a bit of hair that doesn't grow back but this is usually only small and can be covered up by the rest of your hair.

Not all treatments will make your hair fall out though. You might find that your hair just gets thinner or feels drier.

"When I lost my hair, my friends all came round and we cut it short. Then we shaved it. We made it fun and had a good time."

Kathryn, 21

Feeling tired

Treatment can be intense and it's common to feel really tired (or 'fatigued' if you want to get technical). The tiredness should ease up when your treatment is finished but you'll have been through a lot physically and emotionally, so it's quite normal to feel tired for a while afterwards. Try to focus on doing what makes you happy and energised, and remember to be kind to yourself. If you need to have a Netflix binge, do it. Here are some other tips:

- Use a diary to keep track of when you feel really tired and show it to your doctor or nurse who can suggest ways to help you get the rest you need
- Pace yourself and get lots of rest
- Think about things you can do with friends that aren't too demanding, like a film and snacks night
- Speak to your doctor to see if it's safe to have a massage or aromatherapy to relax you
- It might sound counter intuitive but exercise can help to beat tiredness. A physiotherapist can put together an exercise programme that's right for you
- Have a nice bath and shower, either to energise you in the morning, or relax you before bed
- Try going to bed at the same time every night and waking up at the same time in the morning. Make your bedroom a peaceful haven — avoiding using it as a place to work or study can help you relax.

Lack of concentration

'Chemo brain' is a thing. It's quite normal to feel mentally 'foggy' or find it hard to focus on anything for very long. Initially, it might sound like a good reason to pause studying or work for a while but it's understandable if that becomes frustrating for you – especially if you're stuck in hospital for long a long of time and want something to do. To deal with concentration problems, you can:

- Avoid overwhelming yourself by planning too far ahead — take each day as it comes
- Keep yourself mentally stimulated with crosswords, sudoku or brain trainer apps
- Use planners, calendars, post-it notes, to-do lists and reminders on your phone
- Keep notes of anything important, such as conversations with your doctor – or ask someone to take notes for you
- Chat with your family and friends about any difficulties you're having with concentration and memory so they can help
- Talk to your doctor as they might be able to do something.

What else can I do about side effects?

If you're having problems because of your treatment, always ask the team looking after you for help. And try to remember that, although the side effects of cancer treatment can be difficult to deal with, most of them are only short-term and will gradually disappear once your treatment is complete.

Where can I find more information?

Visit clicsargent.org.uk where you can find advice about dealing with the specific side effects related to your treatment, and how to look after your emotional and physical wellbeing. You can also find contacts and organisations to help you if you feel that you are struggling.

Who are we?

CLIC Sargent is a charity dedicated to supporting young people like you. We help people with cancer aged 24 and under from diagnosis onwards. To find out more about how we can help you and your family, or for more information about living with cancer, visit clicsargent.org.uk