

Safe Management of Chemotherapy in the Home

The following is a reprint from Appendix 1 from *Chemotherapy and Biotherapy Guidelines and Recommendations for Practice* (Fourth Edition) by Martha Polovich, PhD, RN, AOCN®, MiKaela Olsen, MS, RN, AOCNS®, and Kristine B. LeFebvre, MSN, RN, AOCN® (Eds.). Copyright 2014 by the Oncology Nursing Society.

You are getting medicine used to treat cancer (chemotherapy, or “chemo”). You must be careful to make sure other people do not accidentally touch the drugs or your body waste for a time after treatment. This article teaches you and your family how to protect others from the chemotherapy and how to handle the waste from the chemotherapy in your home.

Chemotherapy Drugs Are Dangerous

Chemotherapy drugs are strong chemicals. Only patients who need chemotherapy for treatment should take or touch the drugs. Items that touch the medicines (such as syringes and needles) are contaminated with chemotherapy. Regardless of how you take the medicines, chemotherapy remains in your body for many hours and sometimes days after your treatment. Your body will get rid of the drugs in your urine or stool. Traces of chemotherapy also may be present in vomit.

Disposal of Chemotherapy

Dispose of items contaminated with chemotherapy separately from other trash. If required, the company supplying your medicines and equipment will give you a hard plastic container labeled with “Chemotherapy Waste” or a similar warning. Place equipment and gloves that have touched chemotherapy into this container after use. If the waste is too large to fit in the plastic container, place it in a separate plastic bag and seal it tightly with rubber bands. Place sharp

objects in the hard plastic container. The company will tell you who will pick up the disposal container.

Body waste: You may use the toilet (septic tank or sewer) as usual. Flush twice with the lid closed for 48 hours after receiving chemotherapy. Wash your hands well with soap and water afterward, and wash your skin if urine or stool gets on it. Pregnant women, children, and pets should avoid touching chemotherapy or contaminated waste.

Laundry: Wash your clothing or linen normally unless they become soiled with chemotherapy. If that happens, put on disposable gloves and handle the laundry carefully to avoid getting chemotherapy on your skin. If you do not have a washer, place soiled items in a plastic bag until they can be washed.

Skin care: Chemotherapy spilled on skin may be irritating. If this happens, thoroughly wash the area with soap and water, then dry. If redness lasts for more than one hour or if a rash occurs, call your doctor. To prevent chemotherapy from being absorbed through the skin, wear gloves when working with chemotherapy, chemotherapy-soiled equipment, or waste.

Eye care: If any chemotherapy splashes into your eyes, flush them with water for 10–15 minutes and notify your doctor.

Questions and Answers

Is it safe for family members to have contact with me during my chemotherapy treatment?

Yes. Eating together, enjoying favorite activities, hugging, and kissing are all safe.

Is it safe for my family to use the same toilet as I do?

Yes. As long as you clean any chemotherapy waste from the seat, sharing is safe.

What should I do if I do not have control of my bladder or bowels?

Use a disposable, plastic-backed pad, diaper, or sheet to soak up urine or stool. Change immediately when soiled, and wash skin with soap and water. If you have an ostomy, your caregiver should wear gloves when emptying or changing the bags. Discard disposable ostomy supplies in the chemotherapy waste container.

What if I use a bedpan, urinal, or commode?

Your caregiver should wear gloves when emptying body wastes. Rinse the container with water after each use, and wash it with soap and water at least once a day.

What if I vomit?

Your caregiver should wear gloves when emptying the basin. Rinse the container with water after each use, and wash it with soap and water at least once a day.

Is it safe to be sexually active during my treatment?

Ask your doctor or your nurse this question. Traces of chemotherapy may be present in vaginal fluid and semen for up to 48 hours after treatment. Special precautions may be necessary.

How should I store chemotherapy at home?

You should store chemotherapy and equipment in a safe place, out of reach of children and pets. Do not store chemotherapy in the bathroom, as high humidity may damage the drugs. Check medicine labels to see if your chemotherapy should be kept in the refrigerator or away from light. Be sure all medicines have complete labels.