

# Oral Systemic Therapy

**Patient's Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Type of Treatment:

\_\_\_\_\_

Cancer Doctor:

\_\_\_\_\_

Cancer Clinic:

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number:

\_\_\_\_\_

Emergency Department Phone Number:

\_\_\_\_\_

Who do I call if I have questions about my treatment?

\_\_\_\_\_

**My Medications:**

Name of drug:            Dosage:            I take this for:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



# Oral Systemic Therapy

## Introduction

This booklet provides an overview of oral systemic therapy for cancer treatment. Your Cancer Care Team (Cancer Doctor, Nurse or Pharmacist) will also give you detailed information about your specific cancer treatment:

- The name of the treatment.
- How and when to take it.
- Risks and how to avoid them.
- Side effects and how to manage them.
- How to avoid infections.
- How to keep your family and caregivers safe.

Please share this booklet and the other information you get with your family and caregivers. Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not fully understand about your cancer treatment.

## What is systemic therapy?

Systemic therapy is a type of cancer treatment that travels through the blood to reach cells all over the body.

Systemic therapy includes:

- Chemotherapy drugs that kill, stop or slow the growth of cancer cells. Also called “chemo”.
- Hormones that change hormone levels to stop or slow cancer growth.
- Biological therapies that stop or slow cancer growth.

Systemic therapy may be your only cancer treatment. Or, you may also have surgery and/or radiation therapy.

**What are your questions? Please ask.  
We are here to help you.**

Systemic therapy can:

- Shrink a tumour before other treatment.
- Kill cancer cells that stay after treatment, have come back or spread to other parts of your body.
- Slow or stop cancer growth.
- Ease symptoms, such as pain.
- Help other treatments work well.

### **What is oral systemic therapy?**

Oral systemic therapy is any drug you take by mouth to treat cancer.

- It is just as strong as the cancer treatment given by intravenous (IV ) and works just as well.
- It can be pills, tablets, capsules or liquid.
- Some cancer treatments are only available as oral drugs.
- Some cancer treatments are only available as IV drugs.

You will be given detailed information about the type of treatment you are taking. Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not understand about your treatment.

### **How do I get my treatment?**

Your Cancer Doctor will give you a prescription. Take the prescription to your usual pharmacy. The pharmacy may need a few days to fill it.

Make sure the Pharmacist knows about other prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs you are taking; including herbal products, natural remedies and vitamins.

You will need to use your health insurance to pay for your treatment (for example Pharmacare, Blue Cross, or Sun Life).

- Most plans cover cancer treatment.
- You may have to apply for special coverage.
- If you are concerned about your drug coverage or the cost of treatment talk to your Cancer Care Team.

When you finish a cycle, you may have some tests to see how the cancer is responding and how your body is coping. (See page 4).

**Do not start your next cycle until you talk with your Cancer Doctor or Nurse.**

### **How do I take my treatment?**

For the treatment to work well, it is important to take the right amount, on the right day, at the right time.

- Do not make any changes to how or when you take your treatment without talking to your Cancer Doctor.
- Use a calendar to help you keep track of when you need to take your treatment. Ask your Nurse or Pharmacist to help you fill in the calendar.
- Your treatment may come in a special package to help you keep track of when to take it.
- Plan ahead to make sure you have enough pills for travel, holidays and weekends.

When you get your treatment, read the package label, check the drug name and dosage. If something doesn't look right to you, ask the Pharmacist to check it.

Wash your hands, with soap and water, before and after you take your treatment. Swallow each pill or capsule whole – do not crush or chew them.

- If you take too much, call your Cancer Doctor or Nurse right away. Or, go to the Emergency Department right away.
- If you cannot swallow your pills, ask your Pharmacist about other ways to take your treatment.
- If you are vomiting (throwing up) and unable to keep your pills down, call your Cancer Doctor or Nurse.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible. If it is almost time for your next dose, do not take the dose you missed, take your next dose. Do not double the dose.
- If you are on a clinical trial, you will be given special instructions about what to do if you miss a dose.
- If you do miss a dose, make a note in your calendar.

Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not fully understand about when and how to take your treatment.

## **How Long Do I Take My Treatment?**

Your Cancer Doctor will design a treatment plan for you. Not all patients with the same cancer have the same treatment. Treatments can be 3 to 6 months, or longer.

How long you take your treatment depends on:

- The type and stage of your cancer.
- If your treatment is being used to cure your cancer, control its growth, or ease your symptoms.
- The type of treatment you are taking.
- How your body and the cancer react to the treatment.

Systemic therapy is given in cycles. During a cycle, you may take your treatment daily, weekly, or monthly.

Some cycles are followed by a rest period when you do not take any treatment. This gives your body a chance to build healthy cells and helps you gain strength.

Make sure you know if your treatment plan includes rest periods when you do not take treatment.

## **What tests do I need?**

Blood work, other tests and clinic visits are a very important part of your cancer treatment. Your Cancer Care Team will explain the tests you need and when you need them.

- These tests and visits will help your Cancer Doctor know how the treatment is working and how your body is coping with the treatment.
- The tests also help your Cancer Doctor to decide when you are ready for another treatment cycle.
- Use a calendar to keep track of your tests and clinic visits.
- How your body and the cancer react to the treatment.

Systemic therapy is given in cycles. During a cycle, you may take your treatment daily, weekly, or monthly.

Some cycles are followed by a rest period when you do not take any treatment. This gives your body a chance to build healthy cells and helps you gain strength.

Make sure you know if your treatment plan includes rest periods when you do not take treatment.

## **What are the risks and side effects?**

Some cancer treatment can harm healthy cells and cancer cells, causing risks and side effects.

- The risks and side effects differ from drug to drug and person to person.
- Some types of treatment can harm unborn babies.

If you, your partner or caregiver are pregnant or could become pregnant ask your Cancer Care Team about the risks.

- Cancer treatment can affect the way other drugs work. And, other drugs and foods can affect the way your treatment works or cause health problems.
- Before starting your treatment tell your Cancer Care Team about other prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs you are taking, including herbal products, natural remedies and vitamins.
- Ask your Cancer Care Team if there are any foods you should avoid while you are taking treatment.
- You may have none, one or more side effects.
- Your Cancer Care Team will tell you which side effects are most common with your type of treatment and how to deal with them.
- Ask if there are any side effects that you should call the Cancer Doctor or Nurse about right away. Telling your Cancer Care Team about side effects as soon as they happen can help to make sure that the problem does not become dangerous for you.
- Your Cancer Doctor may change your treatment or give you other drugs to help you feel better.
- Because you are taking your treatment at home, you and your family must carefully watch for any side effects. Side effects can start or get worse quickly.

## **Why should I avoid infections?**

Cancer and its' treatment can weaken your body's ability to fight infections.

Infections can usually be treated with antibiotics. If an infection is not treated quickly, it can be much more difficult to get it under control.

## **Go to the Emergency Department right away if:**

- Your temperature goes above 38 ° C (100.4 ° F)
- You suddenly feel unwell, even if you have a normal temperature.

If you have a yellow card called “Fever in a Cancer Patient” take this card with you to the emergency department.

## **Can I do my regular activities during treatment?**

Many people can keep doing the things they were doing before treatment, such as going to work or school, exercising or doing hobbies. Treatment side effects can cause some people to change their regular activities.

Feeling tired is a common side effect. It can make it hard to put in a full day’s work or do other things you want to do.

Talk to your Cancer Care Team about your regular activities and the changes you may need to make.

## **How do I safely store my treatment at home?**

Most treatment is stored at room temperature. Keep it away from heat, sunlight and moisture. You will be told if your treatment needs special storage or handling.

- Keep your treatment in the original container.
  - › Do not put any other drugs in your cancer treatment container.
  - › Do not put your cancer treatment in another container. Store your treatment in a safe place.
- Away from other family members’ drugs.
- Out of the reach of children or pets.
- Away from places where food or drinks are stored or eaten.

If another person takes your treatment, call 911 or go to the Emergency Department right away.

If a pet eats your treatment, call your Vet or the Animal Emergency Clinic right away.



Return damaged, unused, discontinued, or expired cancer treatment to the Pharmacist or hospital for disposal. Do not flush it down the toilet or throw it out in your garbage. Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not understand about storing your treatment.

### **How can I keep my family and caregivers safe?**

Oral systemic therapy stays in your body for hours or even days. It can be in your body fluids (such as blood, urine, stool, vomit or semen).

Since your treatment can harm healthy cells, special care must be taken to keep family and caregivers from touching your treatment and your body fluids.

You will be given a booklet called “Cytotoxic Precautions: A Guide for Home”. This booklet explains how to keep your family and caregivers safe while you are taking your treatment. Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not fully understand about keeping your family and caregivers safe while you are taking your treatment.

### **What if I am planning to travel?**

If you plan to travel, discuss this with your nurse. While you are travelling, your cancer treatment container should be stored in a sealed container and must be kept at the correct temperature.

### **What else do I need to know?**

- Carry a list of all the drugs you are taking in your wallet or purse. List your cancer treatment, other prescription drugs and any herbal products or vitamins you take.
- There is a place to list your drugs on the inside cover of this booklet.
- Talk to your Cancer Doctor before you get any immunizations (for example, the flu shot).
- Tell your other doctors, dentist and health care workers that you are taking cancer treatment.

## **Where can I get more information or support?**

Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not fully understand about your treatment.

- Ask your Cancer Care Team for more information or referral to support services.
- Cancer Patient Navigators can help coordinate your care, give you information and connect you with services in your community. You can reach your Cancer Patient Navigator by calling toll free **1-866-524-1234**.
- The Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program website **[www.nscancercare.ca](http://www.nscancercare.ca)** has helpful information.
- The Canadian Cancer Society offers information and support programs. Call **1-888-939-3333** or visit **[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)**.

**Looking for more health information?**

Find this brochure and all our patient resources here: <http://library.nshealth.ca/PatientGuides>  
Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.  
For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

*Nova Scotia Health Authority promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.  
Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!*

**Nova Scotia Health Authority**  
[www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca)

*Prepared by: Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program  
Approved by: NSCCP Patient Education Committee  
Designed by: Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program Staff*

The information in this brochure is for informational and educational purposes only.  
The information is not intended to be and does not constitute health care or medical advice.  
If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider. The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.

NSCCP-0038 Updated March 2018 ©Nova Scotia Health Authority