

FOLFOX Chemotherapy

This handout provides information about FOLFOX chemotherapy. It is sometimes called as FLOX chemotherapy.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is a method of treating cancer by using drugs. Combinations of chemotherapy drugs are often used in treating cancer.

What is FOLFOX?

FOLFOX is a combination of chemotherapy (chemo) drugs used in the treatment of cancer of the bowel. It is sometimes known as FLOX.

FOLFOX chemo is given through an intravenous line (IV). The type of IV is called a PICC line. PICC stands for **P**eripherally **I**nserted **C**entral **C**atheter. The PICC line is put in your upper arm and stays in place for your entire chemo treatment. More information about the PICC line and how it is put into your arm will be provided to you by your primary team.

The chemo drugs that you are on are: Folinic Acid (FOL), Fluorouracil (F) and Oxaliplatin (OX).

These drugs attack and destroy the cancer cells. While doing this, they also destroy healthy cells, which can cause side effects.

There are drugs and ways to control side effects. If you are having a hard time with the side effects, please speak with your primary nurse.

Hair loss

Hair loss is **rare** with this treatment, but you may notice hair thinning. If any of your hair does fall out, it will grow back after treatment has finished.

What are the side effects of FOLFOX that I may have?

You may have:

- fatigue – feeling very tired, no energy
- nausea and vomiting
- laryngeal spasm – hard time breathing and swallowing when exposed to cold air and substances
- low white blood cell counts – infection
- diarrhea
- mouth sores
- numbness and tingling in hands or feet

Fatigue

Fatigue is the most common side effect reported by our patients. Patients usually say that they are at their best during the first 3 days after chemo. After that, you may have a loss of energy and experience a general feeling of being unwell. This feeling of being unwell usually last for 4 to 7 days after treatment, and can continue to worsen after each cycle of treatment.

We encourage you to do your regular routine and activities. When you are feeling tired or weak, please rest. Eat a well balanced meal and drink plenty of fluids. Mild exercise may also help.

Nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting is a common side effect of chemo.

Feelings of nausea are usually worse 2 to 3 days after chemo treatment and can last for several days. Medications that may be used to try to stop the nausea and vomiting include: dexamethasone, ondansetron and granisetron.

There are also other medications that your doctor may recommend. Try to drink plenty of clear fluids, have several small meals a day and to eat slowly.

Infection

You may get an infection after chemo. The usual sign that you may be getting an infection is a fever that is greater than 38°C (100°F). If you have a fever of greater than 38°C (100°F) or have flu like symptoms, please contact your Primary Team.

As a result of chemo, your white blood cells will be at their lowest point from days 7 to 14. White blood cells are important in helping the body to fight off infection. During this time, try to avoid being around people who are sick with illnesses such as a cold, cough or flu like symptoms.

Sometimes your white blood counts will be too low and your chemo will be delayed. This will be decided by your oncologist at your appointment before chemo. You may be feeling well, but it would be unsafe to give you chemo at this time. This is because the chemo would affect your body's ability to fight off any infections that you may have been exposed to.

Diarrhea

Diarrhea is an increase in loose, watery stools. Diarrhea is a common side effect of chemo. If you have diarrhea, drink plenty of fluids.

Take anti-diarrhea medications if prescribed by your doctor.

Avoid spicy foods, fried foods, drinks with caffeine (coffee, tea, cola), alcohol, orange or prune juice.

If you have diarrhea, you may have:

- stomach cramps, pain, bloating
- sore skin around your bottom, from frequent stools
- dehydration and fatigue, from excess water loss

Call your doctor if you have:

- blood in the stools or black stools
- fever of 38°C (100°F) or more, with or without diarrhea
- sudden bloating of the stomach (abdomen)
- symptoms of dehydration: decreased urination (peeing), increased thirst and lightheadedness

Laryngeal spasm

You may feel that you are having a hard time breathing or swallowing.

This is due to the Oxaliplatin affecting the area around the voice box (larynx). This is called a laryngeal spasm. This feeling is temporary and does go away.

It is important to avoid cold drinks as symptoms may be made worse by the cold temperature. Wear warm clothing and avoiding breathing in cold air during colder months.

Mouth sores

Your mouth may become sore or dry after your treatment.

Mouth problems can be caused by the chemo. Tell your nurse or doctor if you have this problem, as they can prescribe special mouthwashes and medicine to help. It is important to avoid hot, spicy or acidic foods. Eat soft foods.

Steps to provide good mouth care:

- Use a soft toothbrush when brushing your teeth to prevent sore gums and bleeding.
- Use toothpaste for sensitive teeth if normal toothpaste bothers you.
- Floss gently, avoid rough flossing as your gums may be very sensitive and can easily bleed.
- Brush and rinse your dentures after eating. Remove your dentures while sleeping.
- Rinse your mouth at least 4 times a day. Use baking soda or salt and water solution. Mix a teaspoonful baking soda or salt into 1 cup (250ml) of water. You may also use commercial mouthwash such as Biotene.

DO NOT use products which contain alcohol such as Listerine or Scope because the alcohol will worsen pain if there are any open sores.

If you have a sore throat, severe mouth sores, chills or a temperature of 38°C (100°F) or higher, call your Primary Team right away.

Numbness and tingling in your hands and feet

Oxaliplatin can commonly cause damage to nerves and nervous system tissues. This can cause tenderness, numbness and tingling in your hands and feet. This can start a few days or weeks into treatment and usually goes away a few months after treatment has finished.

You may notice it more after every treatment and it may be made worse by exposure to the cold. You may have a hard time with tasks like doing up a button.

- Avoid exposure to the cold as exposure can result in severe pain in the hands, feet and face (wear mittens, and scarf to protect the face, nose and mouth when exposed to cold).

You may also have numbness around the mouth and lips while receiving the IV chemo. This feeling normally only lasts a few hours after treatment is done.

Before each chemo treatment

Your blood work will be checked before each cycle of chemo to see how your body is recovering from the chemo. Your blood work will be reviewed by your oncologist at your appointment before chemo and any issues will be discussed at this time.

Be sure to write down any symptoms that you have and how you are feeling on a calendar to “track” any patterns.

Once your 12 cycles are complete, you will have a follow up visit with your oncologist. During this visit the oncologist will ask you questions about how you are doing and may do a physical exam.

Notes



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