



UCI

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Chemotherapy is one of the most widely used treatments for cancer. It works by targeting and destroying rapidly growing cancer cells. However, because it also affects some healthy cells in the body, patients often experience side effects that can range from mild discomfort to more serious complications. While much of the treatment happens in hospital, a significant part of recovery and day-to-day coping happens at home. Understanding how to manage these side effects safely can improve comfort, prevent complications, and help patients complete their treatment successfully.

Chemotherapy affects fast-growing cells, which include not only cancer cells but also healthy cells in the bone marrow, digestive system, hair follicles, and mouth lining. This is why patients may experience fatigue, nausea, vomiting, hair loss, mouth sores, constipation, diarrhoea, or increased risk of infections.

Fatigue is one of the most common side effects. It is not ordinary tiredness but a deep exhaustion that does not improve easily with rest. Nausea and vomiting can reduce appetite, while changes in taste may make food less appealing. Some patients al-

How to manage chemotherapy side effects at home



so experience emotional effects such as anxiety or low mood, which can make physical symptoms feel worse.

Although these side effects can be challenging, many of them can be managed effectively at home with proper care, lifestyle adjustments, and guidance from healthcare providers.

Practical ways

Nutrition plays a major role in recovery. Patients are encouraged to eat small, frequent meals rather than large portions. This helps reduce nausea and makes eating more manageable. Soft, bland foods such as porridge, rice, bananas, boiled potatoes, soups, and porridge are often easier to tolerate. Staying hydrated is equally important. Drinking enough clean water, oral rehydration fluids, or light soups helps prevent dehydration, especially in cases of vomit-

ing or diarrhoea.

Rest is essential, but it should be balanced with light physical activity. While fatigue can make patients want to stay in bed all day, gentle movement such as short walks or simple stretching exercises can help improve energy levels, mood, and circulation. It is important, however, that patients do not push themselves beyond their limits.

For nausea, patients are advised to avoid strong smells, greasy foods, and very spicy meals. Eating slowly and sitting upright after meals can also help. Doctors often prescribe anti-nausea medication, and this must be taken exactly as directed, even if symptoms improve.

Mouth sores are another common issue. Maintaining good oral hygiene can reduce discomfort and prevent infections. Patients should brush gently using a soft toothbrush, rinse

the mouth with mild salt water, and avoid very hot, acidic, or spicy foods that may irritate sores.

Diarrhoea and constipation can also occur depending on the type of chemotherapy used. Eating the right foods, drinking enough fluids, and following medical advice can help manage these conditions. However, severe or persistent symptoms should always be reported to a healthcare provider.

Preventing infections is very important because chemotherapy can weaken the immune system. Patients should wash their hands regularly, avoid crowded places where possible, and stay away from people who are sick. Even minor infections can become serious during treatment, so early attention is essential.

When to seek medical help

While many side effects can be managed at home, some require urgent medical attention. Patients should contact a healthcare provider if they develop a high fever, persistent vomiting, severe diarrhoea, difficulty breathing, unusual bleeding, or signs of infection such as chills or extreme weakness. Self-medication should be avoided unless prescribed, as some drugs or herbal remedies can interfere with cancer treatment.

Family members and caregivers play a crucial role in supporting patients. Helping with household tasks, ensuring medication is taken correctly, and offering emotional support can significantly ease the burden of treatment. Emotional wellbeing is just as important as physical care. Patients may experience fear, anxiety, or mood changes, and a calm, supportive home environment can make a difference.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute