

What does chemotherapy involve?

(En quoi consiste la chimiothérapie?)

Chemotherapy is a treatment which aims to eliminate cancer cells. The drugs used prevent cancer cell division and cause their death. The main disadvantage of chemotherapy is that the drug circulates throughout the entire body, which can affect certain healthy organs. However, chemotherapy also acts on the cancer cells disseminated throughout the body, even those which have not been detected by imaging examinations. It is known as general or systemic treatment.

Chemotherapy uses molecules – plant extracts or synthesised in the laboratory. Several types of chemotherapy drugs can be used, alone or in combination.

Neoadjuvant, adjuvant and concomitant chemotherapy

Chemotherapy may be proposed before surgery to reduce the volume of the tumour and thus facilitate the operation: this is known as **neoadjuvant chemotherapy**.

Chemotherapy may also be proposed after local treatment (surgery or radiotherapy) when the cancer carries a risk of developing metastases. In this case it is complementary treatment which is intended to reduce the risk of recurrence (reappearance of signs or symptoms indicating the presence of the cancer): this is known as **adjuvant chemotherapy**.

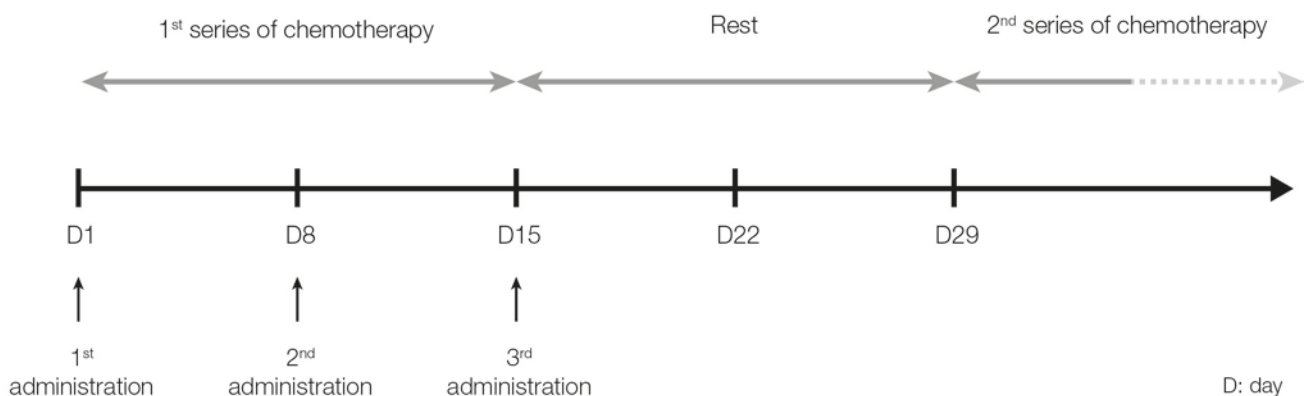
Chemotherapy may also be proposed during radiotherapy – it is known as **concomitant radiochemotherapy**.

What is the chemotherapy procedure?

The procedure for chemotherapy is **planned according to a protocol* drawn up by the medical team and adapted to your case**. A chemotherapy protocol includes one or more medicinal products administered over one or more days: this is a **course of chemotherapy or a cycle of chemotherapy**. **Periods of treatment are alternated with rest periods: between two courses, an interval of one to four weeks is needed, depending on the protocol.**

The rest period allows the body to recover from any side effects. The number of cycles (at least 2 or 3) is adapted to each patient.

Example of chemotherapy protocol



* accurate description of the conditions and procedure for a trial or a treatment. A chemotherapy protocol is intended to specify the names and doses of the drugs used, the number of cycles, etc.

Chemotherapy drugs can be administered in several different ways: by injection into a vein (intravenous route, the most common), by tablets to be swallowed (oral route) and more rarely, directly into the tumour.

In some cases of intravenous chemotherapy, it will be suggested that you have a catheter fitted before treatment (simple catheter or implantable chamber). This is a fine, flexible tube which is installed in a vein in order to inject the chemotherapy drug. A catheter reduces the risk of damaging your veins and facilitates the administration of chemotherapy perfusions. The catheter improves your comfort because you won't feel a prick at each injection.

Before each course of chemotherapy, a **pre-treatment examination** (before treatment) consisting of blood tests, is carried out to allow the cancerologist to check your state of health.

The duration of the perfusions varies according to the protocol, from several minutes to several hours. A continuous perfusion over several days may also be scheduled.

Anti-nausea medication (anti-emetics) or treatment to **prevent allergic reactions** (anti-histamines) may be administered to you, depending on your treatment. **A supplement**, of vitamins for example, may also be prescribed to reduce the drug's toxicity in healthy cells and/or to limit certain adverse effects. When they are prescribed, these supplements are an integral part of your therapeutic protocol.

The place where your intravenous chemotherapy takes place may be: **the outpatients department** where you will stay for a few hours only, **full hospitalisation** for perfusion over several days which requires surveillance.

The administration of chemotherapeutic products is not painful. However, there are certain side effects. The effects of the treatment on the tumour and the way in which you react to the medication are assessed during regular follow-up visits. Depending on these elements, the doctor may sometimes modify the procedure and duration of your chemotherapy. Therefore, the total duration of your chemotherapy treatment can be changed.

