MINNESOTA OVARIAN CANCER ALLIANCE

Managing Side Effects from Ovarian Cancer Treatment

A Helpful Guide from Survivors

A small group of ovarian cancer survivors from the MOCA community shared their advice for managing side effects to help others navigate their journeys with the disease.

The information provided should not be considered a substitute for the opinion of a qualified health care provider. MOCA does not recommend or guarantee any product mentioned. Please use this information to assist you in obtaining further information and in making your own health care decisions.

Bone Pain

- Epsom salt baths for bone pain may be helpful.
- Ask your doctor about taking an antihistamine, such as Claritin D, to help.

Chemo Brain

- If you're starting to experience chemo brain (a term used to describe thinking and memory problems that can occur during and after cancer treatment), know you are not alone.
- Read short stories, rather than long, lengthy books until you can maintain your concentration for longer periods of time.
- Here are some tips to help with memory or concentration: Keep a planner, or journal lists, exercise your brain with crosswords, puzzles, etc.
- Meet up with other cancer survivors if you are feeling up to it. Join a support group. Conversation also keeps our brains active.

Constipation/Diarrhea

- This may be a side effect due to chemotherapy, pain medications or poor eating due to treatment. Make sure your treatment team has provided you with instructions on ways to reduce the potential of these symptoms or deal with them if you experience these issues.
- Ask your health care team about over the counter medications such as Milk of Magnesia, Senna, Dulcolax, magnesium citrate, Senakot-dual action and MiraLAX. MiraLAX can be taken daily, and you can easily adjust the dose since it is a powder.
- If you're experiencing constipation after an infusion, you may want to consider taking laxatives the day before and the day of the infusion. An OTC magnesium supplement may help keep your magnesium levels up and act as a stool softener/laxative. Ask your health care provider about an appropriate dosage. One survivor's integrative medicine doctor recommended taking 250 mg, twice a day.
- Other tips to help with constipation:
    - High fiber foods (prunes, bran cereal, vegetables)
    - Hydration
    - Walking or gentle exercise (20-30 minutes)
    - "Smooth Move" tea

Constipation/Diarrhea *(continued)*

- Tips to help with diarrhea:
  - Imodium or other anti-diarrhea medication
  - Hydration
  - Soft foods that are low in fiber
  - Avoid greasy or spicy foods and caffeine

Hair Loss

- If hair loss is a side effect, consider taking control of when and how you lose your hair. Typically, hair loss will occur after treatment 1 or 2.
- Consider getting your hair cut very short, either before you start chemo or after your first treatment. Talk with your hairdresser. They may have experience doing this for others.
- Put a towel down on your pillow when your hair starts to fall out. Beanies can be nice to wear to bed, too. The beanie and towel catch all the tiny little stubs. This will save washing sheets and pillowcases every day.
- Some hair salons offer free cuts to cancer patients.
- It's not recommended that you shave your hair off bare, as this can cause irritation. It works well if you can leave ¼ - ½ inches of hair. It's easier when it falls out.
- If your scalp hurts, try running warm water over it a couple of times a day.
- You might notice you have a runny nose which may be caused by loss of nasal hair. Hair on other areas of the body including your eyebrows, eyelashes, legs, and underarms may also fall out or thin.
- Once your hair starts growing back, there are shampoos and oils that may encourage growth. Consider shampoos with biotin and argan oil. One survivor found that rice water shampoo helped.
- Options for after hair loss are wigs or head coverings. This is a personal decision. Several salons fit, style and sell wigs for cancer patients. You may want to wait a bit before buying a wig. You may find head coverings more comfortable, and they are less expensive.
- Head coverings can be scarves or hats. Some salons carry these items, along with many stores and Amazon. The softer the material, the more comfortable they are.
- Buff neck gaiters make wonderful soft hats. Try turning it inside out, putting a binder on the excess material and flipping it back.

Hair Loss *(continued)*

- You can also talk with your team about cold cap or scalp cooling systems. These have been shown to reduce hair loss for some patients. Some health systems have them available for use.
- Not everyone may choose to cover their head. Some survivors believe going bald is a "freeing" experience. It's an opportunity to raise awareness of ovarian cancer to anyone who comments on your baldness.

Mouth Sores

- Try gentle teeth brushing.
- There are prescription mouthwashes to help treat mouth sores that you may be able to get from your health care provider. Ask your health care team about "Magic Mouthwash." There are other mouth washes formulated to help dry mouth which can occur.
- Consider a salt water and baking soda rinse, 4 times per day.
- Make sure to stay hydrated.
- To make your own mouth rinse, you can combine 1 quart of water, 1 teaspoon of salt and 1 teaspoon of baking soda. Rinse, gargle and spit several times a day.
- Keep your mouth as clean as possible.

Neuropathy

- This side effect often impacts the hands and feet and causes numbness, pain and weakness.
- If you are experiencing neuropathy, acupuncture may be helpful and is covered by many insurance policies.
- Massaging feet with oils in the morning and before bed may help. Some survivors have recommended frankincense and myrrh.
- Ask your provider about taking an antihistamine such as Claritin-D to help with neuropathy. Be sure to ask about the appropriate dosage.
- Use a walker if you need help with balance.

Nausea

- There are anti-nausea drugs that survivors have used in the past, including Ativan (Lorazepam) which can also act as sleep aid and help with anxiety.
- Ask your health care provider about cycling Compazine and Zofran every 4-6 hours, and start before the nausea sets in. (One survivor's oncology nurse recommended this tip.)

Nausea *(continued)*

- You may need to experiment with different prescribed anti-nausea drugs and the timing of doses.
- If you are feeling queasy, try eating popcorn instead of crackers. It's more nutritious and has more fiber.
- Other tips to help with nausea:
    - Small frequent meals
    - Ginger tea and or ginger candies
    - Staying hydrated
    - Guided imagery
    - Staying on top of your anti-nausea medication
    - Acupuncture may be helpful and is often covered by insurance

Taste

- One survivor shared Leann Chin's lemon chicken cut through the "tin mouth" from chemo and tasted good.
- Consider eating a strong mint or candy when they flush your port with saline (to mask the metallic taste). Use it when they access and de-access the port. Mints, medicated cough drops, or other hard candies can help with the "tin mouth" at other times too.
- Try to eat when and what you can.
- Certain foods just won't taste good. Remember, food is medicine—so find foods you can eat. Forcing yourself to eat a food when it is not appealing may make it hard to eat that food when your taste returns to normal.
- If water tastes funny, try sparkling water. One survivor liked the sour flavors best (lemon, grapefruit, etc.). Or mix juice with plain sparkling water.

Other Side Effects

- If you develop anemia (low hemoglobin), you may feel out of breath, especially going up stairs. You might be eligible for a blood transfusion, which could make you feel better almost immediately. You may want to consider asking your team if this is an option.
- Inquire what complications may occur after treatment. For example, insomnia is one possible condition that may develop.
- For insomnia, try melatonin. Ask a health care provider about the proper dosage for you. (One survivor's palliative care doctor recommended a 10 mg dosage.)