Gemcitabine (Gemzar®)

This fact sheet is for anyone diagnosed with pancreatic cancer who would like to find out more about gemcitabine chemotherapy to treat pancreatic cancer. It provides information about how gemcitabine is given and the side effects.

Each hospital will do things slightly differently, and treatment will vary depending on your cancer, so speak to your doctor about your own situation.

You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our Support Line about any questions you have about chemotherapy. You can call them free on 0808 801 0707, or email support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

Gemcitabine is one of the standard treatments for locally advanced and advanced pancreatic cancer. It is also the recommended treatment after surgery to remove pancreatic cancer (known as adjuvant chemotherapy). It may be used on its own or in combination with other drugs to try to make treatment more effective.

How is gemcitabine given?

Gemcitabine is given in a four-week cycle, usually over several months. You will have one dose of the drug per week for three weeks, then one week off. The days you have your treatment are referred to as day 1, day 8 and day 15. The exact number of cycles you have will depend on how well the treatment works, but expect to have three months of treatment to start with, or six months if you are having it after surgery. Speak to your oncologist about your treatment plan.

Gemcitabine is given as an infusion. A fine plastic tube (cannula) will be inserted into a vein in your arm or hand and attached to a drip. The drip will usually be controlled by a pump that delivers the chemotherapy at the correct rate – it usually takes 30 minutes. After this is finished, the nurses will attach a small bag of fluid to flush out the tube and make it safe to remove it.

If you have poor veins which make it difficult to insert the tube, you may need to have a central line inserted. This is inserted into a vein either in your arm or chest, and stays in place throughout your treatment. There may also be other options available. Read more about central lines and how they are inserted at Cancer Research UK.
Occasionally, gemcitabine can cause pain along the vein as it is being infused. If you feel any burning, pain or tingling at the vein site during the infusion you should tell the nursing staff straight away. This is uncommon but it should be checked straight away. Slowing down the rate of infusion can often relieve any problems.

“I found receiving the gemcitabine by infusion more and more painful. Over time my veins got more and more difficult and it often took two or three attempts to get the cannula inserted. The nurses did have an anaesthetic cream. They also told me that I could have had a central line.”

What are the side effects?
Gemcitabine can cause side effects, although everyone is affected in different ways. It’s unusual to get all the possible side effects.

There are ways to manage the side effects, and you may be given medication to help with some side effects. For example, you may be prescribed anti-sickness medication to deal with feeling sick (nausea). If you are prescribed medication, make sure you take it exactly as you are told.

Speak to your medical team if you get any side effects that you’re worried about, or that aren’t being properly controlled. You should have been given a phone number to contact them on. They can help you manage the side effects.

Common side effects include the following.

- Flu-like symptoms (including a headache, aching muscles and a high temperature), which are usually worst within 24 hours of each treatment, and can be helped with paracetamol. This is a reaction to the drug and doesn’t mean you have an infection. However, if you have a temperature above 37.5°C or 38°C (depending on the advice you’ve been given by your chemotherapy team) check with the hospital to rule out an infection.
- Fatigue (extreme tiredness). Fatigue can be difficult to manage. Take it easy, and make sure you rest when you need to. You might find it helps to take some gentle exercise, such as going for a short walk when you feel able. A good well balanced diet, and sorting out any other side effects or symptoms of the cancer can also help.
- Tiredness and breathlessness from anaemia, which is a low level of red blood cells. You may need a blood transfusion to help you to feel better.
- Feeling or being sick (nausea or vomiting), although this is usually quite mild. Your doctor can give you anti-sickness medication. Take it as soon as you feel sick. If it doesn’t work, speak to your doctor to change to a different medication – there are lots available.
- A skin rash, which may be itchy. Your doctor can give you medication for this if necessary.
- Increased risk of infection from a low level of white blood cells called neutrophils (neutropenia). You may have headaches, aching muscles, a cough or sore throat, or you may feel shivery and cold. This can be serious. You should contact the hospital straight away if your temperature goes above 37.5°C or 38°C (depending on the advice you’ve been given by your chemotherapy team) – or if you suddenly feel unwell, even if your temperature is normal.
- Bruising resulting from a low level of platelets. This can also cause nosebleeds, bleeding gums or tiny red spots on your arms and legs.
- Effects on how your liver and kidneys work. You will have regular blood tests to check this. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids.
- Swelling in your feet and ankles, or weight gain due to fluid retention. This usually improves by itself. If it doesn't, your doctor may prescribe medication that helps remove the excess fluid.

Less common side effects include:
- Loose watery stools (diarrhoea). Make sure you drink plenty of fluids. Let your doctor or nurse know if it’s severe as they can give you medication to control it.
- Problems emptying your bowels (constipation). Make sure you drink plenty of fluids and try to eat high fibre foods, such as vegetables, fruit, wholemeal bread. If this is a problem, speak to your medical team – they can give you some medication to help you open your bowels.
- Sore mouth or mouth ulcers. Clean your teeth regularly with a soft toothbrush and avoid things like spiccy or citrus foods that might sting the mouth. Your doctor or nurse will be able to give you an anti-bacterial mouthwash that should help.
- Taste changes – such as a metallic taste. You might find it helps to suck boiled sweets or use herbs and spices in your food.
- Hair thinning.
- A blood clot forming in a blood vessel (thrombosis). If you have pain or swelling in your arms or legs or sudden shortness of breath, let your
doctor or nurse know straight away. Read more about blood clots in a vein in our blood clot FAQ on our website at: www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk/dvtrisk.

Ask your medical team for advice on managing these or any other side effects you experience. You can also call our specialist nurses free on our Support Line.

Read more about chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer and looking after yourself during chemotherapy on website at: www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk. You can also read more information about gemcitabine on the Macmillan Cancer Support website.

“When on chemotherapy my dentist gave me special toothpaste, only available on prescription, that has extra flouride in it to prevent dental problems.”

Other sources of information and support
CancerHelp UK
www.cancerresearchuk.org/cancer-help/
Cancer nurses answer questions 0808 800 4040 (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)
Information for patients from Cancer Research UK

Macmillan Cancer Support
www.macmillan.org.uk
Freephone Cancerline 0808 808 00 00 (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm)
Provides practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.
**Further information and support**
Pancreatic Cancer UK is the only national charity fighting pancreatic cancer on all fronts: Support, Information, Campaigning and Research. We are striving for a long and good life for everyone diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

**Support Line**
We run a confidential Support Line for anyone affected by pancreatic cancer. Our pancreatic cancer specialist nurses can provide individual specialist information about pancreatic cancer, treatment options and managing symptoms and side effects. They have time to listen, answer your questions and provide support.

Freephone: 0808 801 0707 (Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm)
Email support@pancreaticcancer.org.uk

**Information**
We provide information about pancreatic cancer, treatment options, side effects and living with pancreatic cancer. All our information is based on the latest evidence, and reviewed by health professionals and people affected by pancreatic cancer.

Go to [www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk](http://www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk)
Download and order publications at [www.pancreaticcancer.org/publications](http://www.pancreaticcancer.org/publications)

**Support groups**
There are pancreatic cancer support groups across the UK, where you can meet other people affected by pancreatic cancer, share experiences and find support.

Find your nearest support group on our website at [www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups](http://www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk/supportgroups)

**Discussion forum**
Join our online discussion forum to talk to others affected by pancreatic cancer. Members include people with pancreatic cancer as well as family and friends. They share their experiences and tips, and support each other.

Sign up on our website at [www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk](http://www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk)
This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK. It has been reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by pancreatic cancer.

References to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet and an acknowledgement of the health professionals who reviewed the booklet are available on our website – www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapy

Pancreatic Cancer UK makes every effort to make sure that its services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope that this information will add to the medical advice you have received and help you to take part in decisions related to your treatment and care. Please do continue to talk to your doctor, specialist nurse or other members of your care team if you are worried about any medical issues.

Give us your feedback We hope you have found this information helpful. If you have any comments or suggestions about this fact sheet or any of our other publications, you can email publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk or write to the Information Manager at the address below.

Pancreatic Cancer UK
2nd floor, Camelford House
87-90 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TW

Telephone: 020 3535 7090
Email: enquiries@pancreaticcancer.org.uk
Website: www.pancreaticcancer.org.uk

© Pancreatic Cancer UK March 2015
Review date March 2017
Pancreatic Cancer UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (1112708)