Chemotherapy uses anti-cancer (cytotoxic) drugs to destroy cancer cells. There are several chemotherapy drugs that can be used to treat cervical cancer. They are often given in combination with radiotherapy and are usually given intravenously (by injection in the vein).

In cervical cancer chemotherapy may be given:

- before surgery or radiotherapy to shrink the size of a tumour
- with radiotherapy – this is called chemoradiation
- if the cancer has spread, to help control it and reduce symptoms.

**Early and locally advanced cervical cancer**

Chemotherapy may be used to treat larger tumours that are confined to the cervix or those that have spread locally (to the surrounding area). It's commonly combined with radiotherapy to make the radiotherapy more effective. This is called chemoradiation. Usually the chemotherapy is given once a week during the course of radiotherapy.

Chemotherapy may sometimes be used before surgery or radiotherapy, to shrink the cancer and to make these treatments more effective. If it is given in this way it's called neo-adjuvant chemotherapy.

**Advanced cancer**

Chemotherapy may also be given to women whose cancer has spread to other parts of the body or if the cancer has come back after radiotherapy. It is used in this situation to try to shrink and control the disease and relieve symptoms, to prolong a good quality of life.

**Side effects**

Chemotherapy can cause side effects, which might be slightly worse when given alongside radiotherapy. Below is an outline of some of the side effects you may experience.

**Lowered production of blood cells**

While the drugs are acting on the cancer cells in your body they also, temporarily, reduce the number of normal cells in your body. When these cells are reduced you are more likely to get an infection and you may tire easily. If you have any signs of infection during chemotherapy you may be given antibiotics. Less commonly if people become anaemic due to the chemotherapy, they may need a blood transfusion.

**Nausea and vomiting**

Your chemotherapy drugs may cause nausea and vomiting. Anti-nausea medication can help and you will be given some before chemotherapy as a pre-medication and some to take at home after treatment.

**Loss of appetite, taste changes and mouth sores**
It is common for your appetite and sense of taste to change when going through chemotherapy. You may not feel hungry or you may not enjoy the foods you usually like. If you can, try to have three small meals a day and three snacks each day. A few mouthfuls of food are better than none. It is also important to drink plenty of water. Some chemotherapy drugs can cause mouth sores. This is rare during chemotherapy for cervical cancer but if you notice any change in your mouth or throat, contact your doctor.

**Changes in bowel function**
Some anti-nausea medicines may cause constipation. If this occurs your doctor may recommend laxatives. Later in treatment, radiation can sometimes cause diarrhoea, which can be treated with anti-diarrhoea medication.

**Tiredness**
People having chemotherapy often become tired and lack energy. Fatigue affects people in different ways. Despite being very tired some people may have trouble sleeping. Talk to your doctor if this is becoming a significant problem. You may need to reduce your activities during treatment and afterwards. Light exercise can help reduce or prevent fatigue.

**Kidney function**
Some chemotherapy drugs affect the way your kidneys work. You will have a blood test before each treatment to make sure your body is well hydrated. You may be asked to drink plenty of fluids and to measure how much liquid you drink and the amount of urine you pass.

**Menopause**
Chemoradiation may cause menopause if you have not reached menopause before your cancer was diagnosed.

**Hair loss**
Many people having chemotherapy worry about losing their hair. Different types of chemotherapy drugs are used to treat different types of cancer. Hair loss is unusual in women having chemoradiation treatment though some thinning may occur. If hair loss or thinning does happen, it usually starts two to three weeks after the first treatment and it grows back when your chemotherapy is completed. Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20 or your doctor or nurse can give more information and support.

**Other side effects**
Chemotherapy may also cause skin rash, tingling or numbness in your hands and feet, hearing problems, loss of balance, joint pain, or swollen legs and feet. Contact your treatment team if you are concerned about any side effects.

Want to know where this information comes from? Click [here](https://www.cancersa.org.au/information/a-z-index/chemotherapy-for-cervical-cancer).