

# Safely Managing Chemotherapy at Home



**Fred Hutch**  
Cancer Center

## Safely managing your chemotherapy at home

Because chemo is made up of hazardous substances that can harm you, it is important to take precautions, especially at home. Only you (the person receiving treatment) or your caregiver should touch chemo and the items used to deliver it, such as syringes, needles, and pill bottles. Any item that comes in contact with chemo is considered contaminated. You must take special precautions to prevent chemo from coming into accidental contact with household belongings, people, and pets. Pregnant women, children, and pets should avoid touching chemo and contaminated waste. In this section, we'll teach you how to handle your medication safely at home.

### Storing, handling, and taking your chemo

- Pregnant or nursing women, and children should not prepare the dose for you.
- Store your chemo and equipment in a safe place and out of reach of children and pets.
- Check your medicine labels for special instructions—some medications need to be refrigerated or kept away from light; follow additional instructions from your care team.



### Oral medication

Your care team will give you instructions on how to take your medication. It is important to follow them. These instructions include:

- Take your oral medication at approximately the same time(s) every day, on a regular schedule. Oral chemotherapy doses are set up so that you will have constant levels of the medication(s) in your body to kill the cancer cells.
- Swallow your medication whole. Do not chew, crush, break, split, or open your pills or capsules. If you are unable to swallow your medication, contact your care team.
- If you miss a dose, contact your care team. Do not take a double dose.
- If you have unused medication, do not throw it in the trash and do not flush it down the toilet or sink. Ask your care team for instructions on how to get rid of unused medication.
- Keep your chemo pills in their original container; do not transfer them to a pill box.
- Do not store chemo in your bathroom because humidity may damage the drugs.
- If you are not taking your medication as prescribed, contact your care team.

## How to take oral chemo

Whenever possible, give yourself your medication and follow the below steps. If someone else needs to give you the medication, they should follow the steps, too.

1. Wash hands with soap and water.
2. Caregivers only: Put on gloves to avoid touching the medication.
3. Transfer medication from its container to a paper cup or the lid of your medication.
4. Take medication.
5. Get rid of cup in trash and put lid back on medication container.
6. Caregivers only: Remove gloves and do not use them for any other reason. Throw gloves in trash.
7. Wash hands with soap and water.

If the oral chemo comes in to contact with your caregiver's skin, he or she should wash with soap and water.



### Getting rid of your chemo

Because chemo is dangerous, you should take special precautions when getting rid of it. Please read the information below and see the section “How to Safely Get Rid of Prescription Medications and Sharps” to learn about these options.

### Getting rid of oral chemo

- Do not crush your chemo drugs.
- Do not flush oral chemo drugs down the toilet.
- Your care team may instruct you to save extra medication. If they do, make sure you store it properly and safely.
- If you are in a research study that uses an oral medication, please consult your study team to learn how to get rid of your medication.

## Getting rid of IV chemo

If you are receiving intravenous (IV) chemo at home, you can get rid of your IV equipment and gloves in the hard, plastic container that comes with your supplies or at Fred Hutch. If the waste is too large to fit in the plastic container, place the waste in a separate, leak-proof plastic bag (such as a garbage bag) and seal it tightly with rubber bands. The company supplying your chemo and equipment will tell you who will remove the waste containers.

## Managing IV chemo spills

The company that supplies your IV chemo will include a spill kit with your medicine. If your chemo spills, follow the instructions on the kit and inform your care team. If, for some reason, you don't have a spill kit available, follow these steps:

1. Put on 2 pairs of disposable gloves.
2. Clamp the IV tubing (you may need to clamp above and below the area of your leak).
3. Turn off the pump if you're using one.
4. Place the following in a leak-proof plastic bag, such as a garbage bag:
  - o All the tubing and containers
  - o The pump
  - o The carrying case, if you have one
5. Soak up the spill with paper towels.
6. Clean the area with soap and water.
7. Rinse with clean water.
8. Put all the supplies used to clean up the spill in a separate leak-proof plastic bag.
9. Remove your gloves and wash your hands with soap and water.
10. Call your care team for instructions on how to manage the spilled chemo, the equipment, and the dirty cleaning supplies.

## Safety precautions at home

### Bodily fluids and wastes

Your urine and stool contain chemo while you're receiving treatment. Traces of chemo may also be present in your vomit, sweat, vaginal fluid, and semen. While on treatment, it's important to follow the below instructions.

- You may use the toilet (septic tank or sewer) as usual. After using the toilet and before you flush, put the lid down. Then, flush it twice to make sure all the waste is gone. Wash your hands with soap and water each time you use the bathroom.
- It is safe for your family to use the same toilet as you. Make sure any chemo waste is cleaned from the toilet using gloves, soap, and water. If your caregivers have contact with your body wastes, they should wear gloves.
- If you don't have control over your bladder or bowels, use a disposable, plastic-backed pad or adult diaper, or sheet to absorb urine or stool. When it gets soiled, put on gloves, remove the soiled piece, remove the gloves, and then wash your skin with soap and water.
- If you have an ostomy, you or your caregiver should wear gloves when emptying or changing the bags. Empty any urine or stool into the toilet and close the lid and flush the toilet twice. Get rid of disposable ostomy supplies by putting them in a leak-proof plastic bag. Put that bag into another leak-proof plastic bag so the supplies are "double-bagged."
- If you use a bedpan, urinal, or commode, it's important for your caregiver to wear gloves when they empty and clean the containers. Your caregiver should rinse the container with water after each use and wash it with soap and water at least once a day.
- If you vomit, it's important for your caregiver to wear gloves when they empty and clean the container. Your caregiver should rinse the container with water after each use and wash it with soap and water at least once a day.



## Laundry

Wash your clothing and bedding normally unless they become soiled with chemo or your bodily fluids. If that happens, put on disposable gloves and handle the laundry carefully to avoid getting chemo or bodily fluids on your skin. Soiled items should be washed separately from other clothes. If you don't have a washing machine, place the dirty items in a sealed, leak-proof plastic bag until they can be washed.

## Skin care

Chemo can irritate your skin. If chemo spills on you, thoroughly wash the area with soap and water, and dry it. If irritation develops that lasts more than 1 hour or if you get a rash, call your care team. Wear gloves when working with chemo, chemo-soiled equipment, or waste to prevent it from touching your skin.

## Eye care

If chemo gets into your eyes, flush them with water for 10-15 minutes, and contact your care team immediately.

## Spending time with others

Living, eating, and doing activities with others is safe. Hugging and closed mouth kissing is safe, too.

## Pregnancy, sexual activity, and contraception

You should not become pregnant or get a partner pregnant while taking chemo. If you are of childbearing age, and it's possible for you to get pregnant, you should use effective contraception while taking chemo and for a minimum of 30 days after your last dose. Please tell your care provider if you become pregnant. If you plan to be sexually active during your treatment:

- Special precautions may be needed for sexual activity while on chemo. Because traces of chemo may be present in your vaginal fluid or semen for up to 48 hours after treatment, you may need to take special precautions.
- Do not breastfeed while taking your medication and for 30 days after your last dose.
- It is safe to hug and kiss.
- Please ask your care team for more information about sexual activity during treatment.

## Traveling with chemo

Traveling with chemo is usually fine but check with your care team or home infusion supplier to confirm it is OK. Ask your care team to provide a letter that says you need to travel with your chemo and that it is OK to travel with it. Some chemo requires special storage, so you may need to make plans, such as traveling with a cooler. Regardless of how you travel (by plane, car, or another mode of transportation), always seal your chemo drugs and pill containers in leak-proof plastic bags. Keep medications in your carry-on bag. Do not put them in your checked bags.

## Sources

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## How to safely get rid of prescription medications and sharps

There are many ways to get rid of expired or unwanted medications and sharps (needles, lancets, and syringes). It is important to get rid of medications securely to prevent others from accidentally eating, drinking, swallowing, or misusing them, especially children and pets. Remember to remove all personal information from prescription labels.

### Prescription drugs

#### Option A

Visit a take-back kiosk or take-back event, which are free and easy ways to get rid of your medicine. To find other kiosks in your area, or to find a take-back event, visit: [med-project.org](https://www.med-project.org).

Note: Herbals, vitamins, supplements, street drugs, inhalers, medical devices, aerosols, inhalers, IV solutions, and sharps are some of the items that cannot be gotten rid of at the take-back kiosk.

#### Option B

Get rid of them at home. Remove the medication from its original container and mix it with an undesirable substance, such as coffee grounds, dirt, or fresh kitty litter. Place the mixture in a sealable bag and throw away in your trash.

#### General information

- If there are specific instructions for getting rid of the medication on the label or package insert, please follow those instructions.
- Do not crush drugs before getting rid of them.
- Do not flush medicines down toilet/sink unless specifically instructed to do so.
  - If a medicine take-back program is unavailable, opioid medicines may be flushed down the toilet.
- Please contact your home infusion company for information on getting rid of IV solutions.



## Used sharps

### Option A

1. Place used sharps in a designated sharps container, at or below the fill line.
2. Close and seal the container.

*Note: Sharps will not be accepted unless they are in an approved container, at or below the fill line, and the container has been sealed.*

### Option B

See the following websites for drop-off locations and instructions:

[safeneedledisposal.org](https://safeneedledisposal.org)

[kingcounty.gov](https://kingcounty.gov)

### General information

- The term “sharps” includes needles, lancets, and syringes.
- FDA-approved sharps disposal containers are generally available through pharmacies (including the pharmacy on the 5th floor of Fred Hutch at South Lake Union), medical supply companies, health care providers, and online.
- Used sharps can injure people and pets, and spread infections that cause serious health conditions.
- The FDA recommends that used sharps be placed in FDA-cleared sharps disposal containers.

## Clinical trial patients

### Option A

Return empty study drug containers and any remaining drugs to your study team.

### Option B

Return empty study drug containers to the pharmacy located on the 5th floor of the clinic. Contact your study team with any questions.

### Other resources

DEA Take-Back Initiative: [deadiversion.usdoj.gov](https://deadiversion.usdoj.gov)

Food & Drug Administration: [fda.gov](https://fda.gov)

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: [hhs.gov/opioids/prevention/index.html](https://hhs.gov/opioids/prevention/index.html)

**Still have questions?  
Contact the Fred Hutch pharmacy at  
206.606.6500.**

