

# Using Chemotherapy to Treat Cancer

The middle of New York City perhaps the last place you might expect someone to go 'unwind.' But – you haven't met Ivy Phillips.

*"I can take long walks and just – it kind of helps to feel the air, the breeze in your face. It helps you to relax."*-Ivy, Patient

Ivy had just moved to the city, about nine years ago, when she found a lump on her breast.

*"And they said, 'You're going to need a surgeon,' and I was like, 'What?' And they were like, 'Yeah, you have cancer.'"*-Ivy, Patient

Following surgery and eight rounds of chemotherapy, Ivy's breast cancer went into remission.

*"Fast forward to 2015, and then I was diagnosed with Ovarian cancer. I had a pretty, large surgery followed by chemotherapy again. Everything was going well for about 11-1/2 months, and found out that I had a recurrence, which basically means that the cancer had come back. Again, it involved more chemotherapy."*-Ivy, Patient

Now, every other week, Ivy gets an infusion through an IV, meaning the medication is delivered directly into her bloodstream. And every day she takes Oral chemo – a pill. For some cancers, chemotherapy may also be delivered other ways including shots, thin tubes called catheters, or creams. There are more than 100 different chemotherapy drugs.

*"Sometimes people get one drug; but more often people get a combination of drugs that work actually differently - or maybe work better together than they do apart."*-Dr. Stephanie Blank, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist

The medications that make up your particular 'Chemo Regimen' are determined by several factors – including the type of cancer you have, and the goal of treatment. Chemotherapy is used to: cure certain types of cancer; control the growth of a tumor, or the spread of cancer cells, when cure is not possible; shrink a tumor prior to surgery or radiation; relieve symptoms a tumor is causing, like pain or pressure; and to destroy microscopic cells that may remain after a tumor has been removed by surgery or radiation.

*"Chemotherapy is considered "Systemic." Some treatments are "Local," which means that they only treat, say, a tumor that's in one spot. But systemic treatment, which chemotherapy is, goes all throughout your body. So, it circulates, and it will treat something in your lung as well as treat something in your liver or anywhere else."*-Dr. Stephanie Blank, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist

But many chemotherapy drugs cannot tell the difference between cancer cells – which multiply uncontrollably and healthy, normal cells – some of which also grow very rapidly.

*"Chemotherapy stops the growth of cells that are dividing more quickly. For example, it affects your hair follicles; and that can result in hair loss."*- Dr. Stephanie Blank, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist

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This is, in part, how chemotherapy causes side effects. Hair loss is perhaps the most familiar one. But chemo can also affect fast-growing healthy cells in the bone marrow, digestive tract, and sometimes nerves and muscles.

*"You should ask questions about what side effects, you might expect during treatment, so you can prepare for them."* - Dr. Stephanie Blank, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist

Your care team has very good medications to treat – or, in some cases, prevent – side effects. And to help reduce the severity of side effects, treatment is usually spread out over time. The period between treatments is called a "Cycle." Most cycles range from two to six weeks.

*"How long a cycle will be will depend upon what type of cancer you have, what type of treatment you're getting, what kind of dosing you have, and how your body clears that chemotherapy."* - Dr. Stephanie Blank, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist

The number of cycles varies as well. Your health care team will let you know how many to expect. While you'll likely feel worse on some days of your cycle and better on others - you will be able to live your life throughout treatment.

*"People always envision the people in movies getting chemotherapy, where they're miserable, and that's not necessarily the case. People live very good lives while on chemotherapy."* - Dr. Stephanie Blank, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist

Ivy Phillips is proof of that, having been on and off chemotherapy for several years - and now on her current regimen indefinitely.

*"There's always the hope of You know what, maybe one day I won't have to do this anymore – like maybe at some point it won't come back. You know, you just try to keep holding onto the hope."* - Ivy, Patient