

## Current Issue

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# Finding Relief

## Alternative Options for Tackling Side Effects

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It's a one-two punch: first they tell you that you have cancer, then they give you treatments whose side effects can make you feel sicker than you've ever felt before. In fact, some patients have such a difficult time with those side effects, they abandon treatment altogether.

But responding to side effects by reducing dosage amounts, interrupting a treatment schedule or discontinuing treatment can increase a patient's risk of recurrence and death. So it makes sense to tackle side effects early on: the sooner you address whatever side effects you're experiencing, the more likely you'll be able to complete your recommended treatment.

While medications can help some patients and may be necessary in certain situations, drugs aren't the only way to find relief during chemotherapy. What follows is a list of a few of the most common side effects breast cancer patients face and some nonpharmaceutical interventions almost any patient can benefit from.

For the most part, the list doesn't include dosage amounts. That's because while there are a lot of helpful herbs and nutrients out there, you still need to seek advice from an expert with specific knowledge and clinical experience in combining supplements with chemotherapy. The wrong combination of supplements could interfere with your treatment. An expert in integrative cancer therapy can help you figure out exactly how much of a supplement you should be taking and which ones you stand to benefit from most. And if you start using supplements, be sure to let your oncologist know.

### **Nausea and Loss of Appetite**

- Gingerroot, which can be purchased at your local health food store, can mitigate nausea when taken before and during treatment. Either place a thin slice of fresh peeled gingerroot (about the size of a dime) on your tongue (you can replace it with a fresh piece after a half hour or so of sucking) or take a 250- to 500-mg gingerroot capsule (you can take up to two capsules four times daily).
- Patients who do even 10 to 15 minutes of aerobic exercise before chemotherapy report a significant reduction in nausea. Walking on a treadmill or pedaling on a stationary bike are often good options for cancer patients, as they can easily stop if they're feeling fatigued. Another possibility is breaking up your exercise with a few short rest periods. For example, perform 1 to 3 minutes of aerobic exercise, follow that with 5 to 10 minutes of rest, then repeat the cycle. This approach provides a bit of recuperative time along with some of the benefits of aerobic exercise.
- There is an acupressure point, approximately two inches down from the palm side of each wrist, that when massaged for 30 seconds will help combat nausea. To try it, press firmly on the groove between the two large tendons at the base of your palm using the thumb or fingers of your opposite hand. There are also bracelets you can purchase that have been designed to keep pressure on that spot.

### **Neuropathy and the Heart**

Breast cancer patients are often treated with taxanes, such as paclitaxel (Taxol or Abraxane) and docetaxel (Taxotere), or anthracyclines such as doxorubicin (Adriamycin). Taxanes can cause neuropathy, a nervous system disorder that causes tingling and numbness in the toes, fingers, feet and hands. Neuropathy can be mild or it can be severe, making patients feel as if their hands or feet have fallen asleep. Anthracyclines can sometimes damage the heart muscle.

- For neuropathy: Vitamin B6 and thioctic acid each works well. Vitamin B6 is a water-soluble vitamin that performs a wide variety of functions in the body and is a key player in the immune and nervous systems. Thioctic acid is a sulfur-containing fatty acid that helps generate energy and is found in every cell in the body. It helps metabolize sugars into fuel for energy.
- For the heart: Vitamin E is a fat-soluble vitamin and antioxidant. Preliminary research suggested a significant protective coronary benefit in women who took vitamin E supplements, though clinical trials have had conflicting results and a study looking at long-

term benefits is still ongoing. The American Heart Association also warns that while some vitamin E supplementation may be helpful, high doses (more than 200 international units per day) can be dangerous. Coenzyme Q10 is a compound made in the body that is used for cell growth. Clinical trials have shown that Q10 helps protect the heart from side effects that may occur with the use of doxorubicin. It's important to note, however, that Q10 may not be as effective in patients taking drugs used to lower cholesterol, blood pressure or blood sugar levels.

### **Fatigue**

It turns out that a contributing factor to fatigue may be an underlying inflammatory condition. To reduce chemotherapy-induced fatigue and restore a sense of vitality, change your diet to one rich in healthy fats like omega-3s and omega-9s, also adding some anti-inflammatory herbs or spices such as turmeric. Turmeric is an ingredient in curry, popular in Indian food. But variety is important, so also consider recipes that call for anti-inflammatories such as ginger, green tea and tart cherry.

As a basic guideline, keep in mind that an ideal diet is low in saturated fats and high in fiber, complex carbohydrates, cold-water fish, cruciferous vegetables (such as broccoli), omega-3 fatty acids and plant-based sources of protein. You should also reduce or eliminate refined flours and sugars and eat little or no red meat.

### **Finding an Expert**

Before you start taking herbs and supplements, it's important to find a doctor who specializes in integrative cancer care. Sometimes other breast cancer survivors will be able to make suggestions, but if you have a hard time finding someone, start by contacting a major cancer center in your state and asking for a referral. If you're looking online, try the National Library of Medicine's Directory of Health Organizations at <http://dirlin.nlm.nih.gov/>. A search that includes the name of your home state and the words "integrative" or "complementary alternative medicine" and "cancer" is a good place to start.