

# Capecitabine for biliary tract cancers

If your doctor recommended capecitabine to treat your cancer, here is some important information about this medication and some aspects related to it.

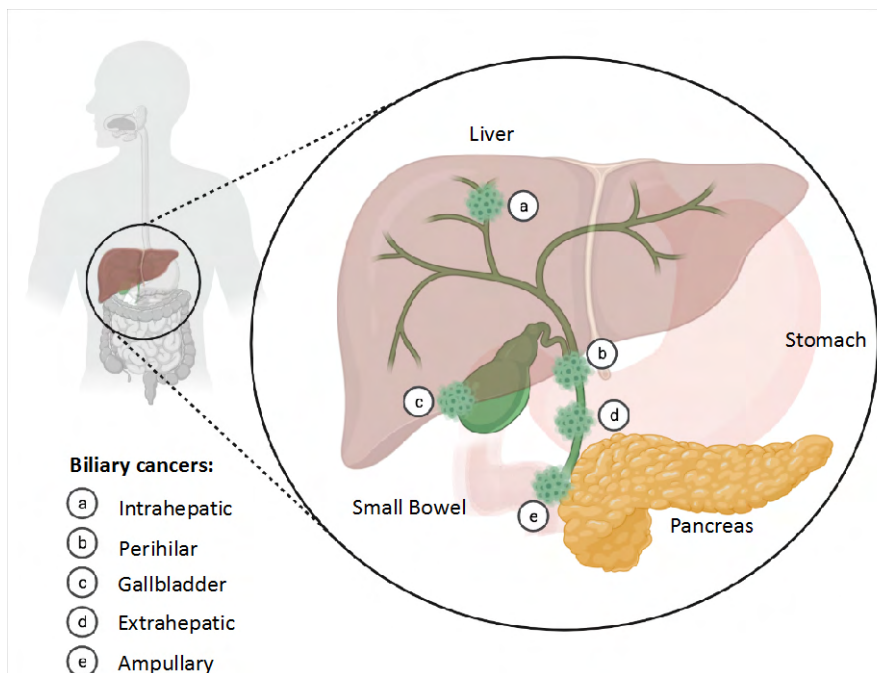
## **Biliary tract cancer**

Cancers of the biliary tract develop from cells (called cholangiocytes) that normally make up the lining of the biliary system (depicted in green in the picture below). Biliary ducts are small tubes that carry the bile, which is used to digest food, from the liver and gallbladder into the small bowel.

Biliary tract cancers are cholangiocarcinoma, gallbladder cancer and ampullary cancer:

- **Cholangiocarcinoma** - which is also known as bile duct cancer. This cancer is categorised in three types, depending on where within the bile ducts it develops:
  - intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma - when the cancer develops in the ducts inside the liver
  - perihilar cholangiocarcinoma - when it develops in the ducts just outside the liver
  - distal/extrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma - when it develops in the ducts further away from the liver
- **Gallbladder cancer** - arises from the gallbladder lining
- **Ampullary cancer** - arises from the join between the bile ducts and the small bowel

You have been given this leaflet because you have been diagnosed with a biliary tract cancer. Your oncologist can discuss with you which biliary tract cancer you have and how extended it is.



## What is capecitabine?

Capecitabine is a chemotherapy drug which kills tumour cells by interfering with the process of cell replication. However, because it can also damage normal cells, it can cause some side effects.

## How is capecitabine administered?

Capecitabine is taken orally (by mouth) as tablets. You will receive capecitabine tablets from the hospital pharmacy at the beginning of each cycle. You will take capecitabine at home for 2 consecutive weeks. It is usually prescribed to be taken twice a day, in the morning and evening.

The ideal dose interval is every 12 hours, but if it is more suitable for you, you may take the tablets every 10 or 11 hours (but never with an interval of less than 8 hours).

The tablets must be taken with plenty of water within 30 minutes of food (a snack will be ok if you can't have a proper meal). Ideally these tablets should be swallowed without being chewed or crushed, but if you have problems with swallowing you may dissolve them in water. If you miss a dose, skip the missed dose and continue with your normal schedule. Do not take two doses at the same time or extra doses.

Your doctor will decide the exact dosage of capecitabine you will receive based on many factors including your height, weight, age, general health and underlying conditions. The pharmacist will tell you the exact number of tablets you have to take each time.

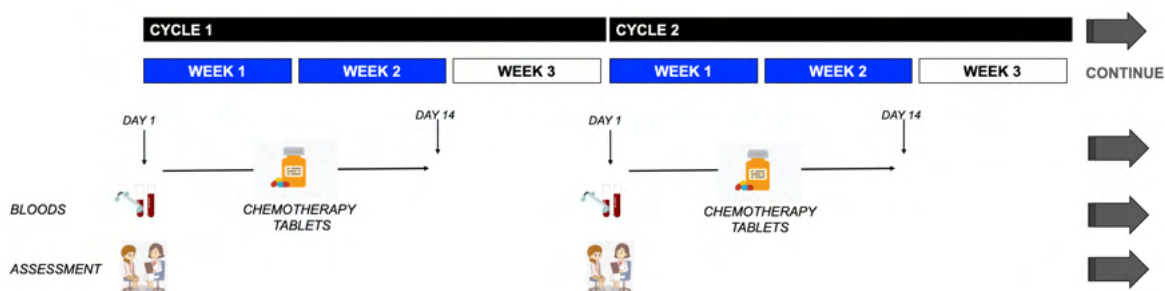
## Schedule of capecitabine treatment

You will receive capecitabine in cycles of treatment. The standard schedule of capecitabine treatment follows a three-week cycle, involving 14 days of chemotherapy (from DAY 1 to DAY 14), followed by one week of rest. At the beginning of each cycle of chemotherapy, you will be assessed by the oncology team. Before each session of chemotherapy, you will have a blood test and your oncological team will check whether you are fit enough for your chemotherapy cycle. It is important that you report any symptom(s) and problem(s) since your last consultation so that the dose/schedule can be adjusted and personalised specifically for you.

On DAY 1 of the first week of each cycle of chemotherapy, you will come to hospital to see the doctor/nurse for assessment and to collect your tablets. However, sometimes the doctor may ask you to have the bloods taken at your GP practice the day before your chemotherapy appointment and the team can assess you by phone without you coming to hospital.

You will not need to stay in hospital for chemotherapy administration.

### Capecitabine cycle: 2 weeks on, 1 week off



## ***Duration of capecitabine treatment***

The doctor will discuss the duration of your treatment with you. Generally, each capecitabine cycle will last for three weeks. If you are tolerating the treatment well, you will receive at least 8 cycles of capecitabine (approximately six months).

## ***What are the side effects of the capecitabine treatment?***

There are known side effects with this treatment, but you may not experience any of them. This does not mean that the treatment is not working. You may get some of the side effects, but you are unlikely to get them all. Remember that side effects are often predictable in terms of their onset, duration and severity; they are almost always reversible and should completely go away after treatment.

As with many other chemotherapy drugs, capecitabine kills cancer cells because of its ability to stop cell division and proliferation. Unfortunately, chemotherapy drugs are not able to recognise the difference between the cancerous cells and normal cells. So, chemotherapy will also kill normal cells that are rapidly dividing, like blood cells, cells in the mouth, stomach, bowel and elsewhere, which is what causes some of the different side effects. Once treatment ends, those normal cells will grow back and be healthy.

There are many medications available that can be taken during chemotherapy to control and minimise the impact of any side effects you may have.

## ***Some of the most common side effects***

**Hematotoxicity:** side effects on your blood cells including

- ***Low number of white blood cells and risk of infection***

Chemotherapy often reduces the number of white blood cells, which help you fight infections. If your white blood cell count is too low (this is called *neutropenia*) you may be at risk of infections. At this time, it is important to be careful to avoid situations that could increase this risk of infections, such as being in crowded places or with people with colds.

As the number of your white cells is most likely to be at its lowest between day 10 and day 14 of each of the cycles of your chemotherapy, during these days it is especially important to avoid risk of infection

Your doctor will check your white blood cells every time before each chemotherapy cycle. The number of white cells will usually return to normal before your next treatment. Sometimes it may happen they are too low to allow you receive the scheduled treatment and your doctor will delay your treatment for a short time until the cell count returns to normal.

It is important you are aware of the signs and symptoms of infection, and you must contact the helpline at your Institution if you develop any of the following:

- Your body temperature goes over 38°C (100.4°F), despite using paracetamol
- You suddenly feel shivery or unwell
- You develop a sore throat, a cough, diarrhoea, increased frequency of urination

- ***Low number of red blood cells***

Chemotherapy can reduce the number of red blood cells. The most important role of red blood cells is carrying oxygen to every part of your body. If the number of red blood cells is too low (this is

called *anaemia*) you can feel tired and breathless. If your *anaemia* is severe, you will need a blood transfusion.

- ***Low number of platelets and risk of bruising or bleeding***

Chemotherapy can reduce the number of platelets. Platelets are useful to help the blood clotting. If your number of platelets is too low (this is called *thrombocytopenia*) you cannot receive chemotherapy and your doctor will delay your treatment for a short time until the platelet count improves. If you have any bruising or bleeding, such as nosebleeds, bleeding gums, tiny red or purple spots on the skin, please inform your doctor.

***Diarrhoea:*** you need to get in touch with your team if you have 4 or more loose poos (stools) in 24 hours. Your doctor will give you anti-diarrhoea tablets (Loperamide). You need to take one Loperamide tablet every time you have loose motion. Remember to drink plenty of water to replace fluids lost. If you experience diarrhoea you should eat low-fibre food and avoid raw fruits, fruit juice, cereals and vegetables. It can help to also avoid alcohol, caffeine, dairy products and high-fat-foods.

***Hand-foot syndrome:*** your hands or feet can become red, sore, dry or swollen, similar to a sunburn. The skin on the palms and soles may start peeling, generally in a mild way and rarely before two weeks from the start of treatment. This can be accompanied by numbness or tingling on your hands or feet. Your doctor will discuss such symptoms with you and how they interfere with your activities in daily life. Hand-foot syndrome may require reductions in the dose of the medication and sometimes, when changes to the skin are more severe, the treatment may need to be stopped. Prevention is very important in trying to reduce the development of hand-foot syndrome. Take care of your hands and feet by following the advice in the “Tips during treatment” section below.

***Mouth sores and ulcers:*** you should always brush your teeth after eating to avoid germs growing. To prevent or to help treat mouth sores use a soft toothbrush and rinse three times a day with 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of baking soda mixed in water (or a general mouthwash). It's better to avoid acidic foods such as oranges, lemons and grapefruits. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have ulcers, as they can help to prevent or to treat mouth sores.

***Elevated liver enzymes:*** if you have high values of transaminases (proteins made by liver) you will not usually notice any difference in your activity or energy levels. Your doctor will check them in blood tests and he/she will decide whether to adjust the dose of chemotherapy.

***Fatigue:*** a very common side effect, which may increase during the treatment course.

***Poor appetite:*** don't worry if you don't eat much for a day or two.

***Blood clotting:*** contact the helpline if your legs are swollen, red and sore or if you develop breathlessness.

## **Some less common side effects**

**Flu-like symptoms:** you may experience these during the chemotherapy treatment or shortly after:

- Feeling hot, cold or shivery
- Fever
- Headache
- Muscle pain
- Fatigue

**Nausea:** sometimes accompanied by vomiting, but this is usually well controlled by anti-sickness drugs. It is important to take anti-sickness medicines even if you don't feel sick because it is easier to prevent sickness rather than treat it once it has started. Contact your doctor or nurse straight away if you've been feeling sick more than once in a day.

**Abdominal pain:** you can have dull aches or cramping with flatulence. This is commonly associated with chemotherapy. If you have persistent sharp pain contact your doctor.

**Constipation:** eating high-fibre foods (vegetables, fruit, wholemeal bread) and drinking at least 2 litres of water can help you. You may need laxatives if it lasts for longer than two/three days.

**Headache:** if this happens, you may take painkillers like paracetamol.

**Build-up of fluid:** You may put on weight and your face or your ankles or legs may swell. It can help to put your legs up on a cushion. The swelling will get better after your treatment ends.

**Difficulty in sleeping:** you can take sleeping tablets if you need them.

**Drowsiness:** chemotherapy may cause you to feel very sleepy (drowsy) and tired. If you feel very sleepy, do not drive or operate machinery.

**Hair loss:** your hair may get thinner, but it is unlikely that you will lose your hair.

## **Medication to help control side effects**

Make sure to let your doctor know of any side effects; there are useful medications to control the symptoms.

## **Should I continue to take all my usual medications?**

Yes, you have to keep taking all your usual medications. Please report to your oncology team all the medications you are taking, so that they can advise.

## **Can I have the flu vaccination?**

Yes, it is advised you have the flu vaccination before you start your chemotherapy. If you have already started your chemotherapy, please ask your doctor who can advise on the best timing to have the vaccination.

## Tips during treatment

- Drink plenty of fluids (at least 2 litres per day) protect your kidneys.
- Maintain good nutrition. Eating small frequent meals may help to reduce nausea. You should avoid fatty or fried foods. You can take anti-sickness drugs if you need.
- Use an electric razor when shaving and a soft toothbrush to minimize bleeding.
- Avoid sun exposure. Wear SPF 15 (or higher) sunblock and protective clothing.
- You may experience drowsiness or dizziness; avoid driving or engaging in tasks that require alertness until your response to capecitabine is known.
- Get plenty of rest.
- To prevent hand-foot syndrome:
  - Reduce friction, pressure and heat exposure to your hands and feet.
  - Avoid long-term contact with hot water such as in washing dishes, long showers or tub baths.
  - Do not use dishwashing gloves because the rubber can keep the skin of your palms warm.
  - Avoid long walks or jumps to reduce the peeling of skin on your soles.
  - Do not use garden/household tools that squeeze your hand on a hard surface.
  - Avoid rubbing lotion on hand and feet but keep the skin moist.
- To help reduce symptoms you can use emollient creams and painkillers to give pain relief. Discuss the best medication with your doctor.
- Keep at home the medications you may need to help control the symptoms.
- Before starting chemotherapy, tell your doctor about any medication you are taking. Sometimes side effects may be related to your medicines and not to chemotherapy.
- If your symptoms are severe or do not improve after 24 hours, do not hesitate to contact the hospital.
- Pay attention to symptoms of a blood clot: pain, redness, swelling of an arm or a leg, breathlessness or chest pain. If you have any of these symptoms contact your doctor.
- Do not receive any kind of vaccination without your doctor's approval while taking chemotherapy.
- If you are a woman of childbearing age:
  - Inform your doctor if you are pregnant or may be pregnant prior to starting this treatment.
  - Avoid getting pregnant during chemotherapy
  - Do not breast feed during chemotherapy

## When to contact the hospital?

If your symptoms are severe or do not improve after 24 hours, do not hesitate to contact the hospital.

### **Hospital emergency contact:**

## Where can I get more information?

If you want to get more information in this field, you can visit **ESMO** website for *Biliary tract cancer: Guide for Patients* and **AMMF** *The Cholangiocarcinoma Charity* website.

You can find the related link below:

<https://www.esmo.org/for-patients/patient-guides/biliary-tract-cancer>

<https://ammf.org.uk/patient-guide/>