



EUROPEAN
ACADEMY OF
DERMATOLOGY &
VENEREOLOGY

Information Leaflet
for Patients

Pruritus in cancer patients



The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet aims to inform you about the itchiness you may experience during cancer therapy. We will explain what pruritus (itchiness) is, why and how it occurs and which is the best way to treat and prevent it.

Pruritus in cancer patients

What is pruritus?

Pruritus is an unpleasant sensation that causes the desire to scratch in order to obtain relief. The manifestation of itching can be a sign of several conditions (skin and general) and can be linked to the intake of drugs. Pruritus can be persistent, or intermittent, localized in specific parts of the body, or more diffuse. In case of chronic pruritus, the symptom lasts longer than 6 weeks. Both, acute and chronic pruritus can severely disturb sleep and quality of life. If pruritus appears, or persists, despite the applied preventive measures (see below), it is necessary to consult a dermatologist.

Who is affected by pruritus?

Pruritus can affect people of any age, from children to elderly individuals. It can be a sign of various conditions: contact allergies, food intolerances, dermatitis, kidney and liver diseases, endocrine changes, cancers, infectious diseases, neurological diseases and psychiatric disorders. In some cases, itching can be also related to drugs. Medications used to treat cancer may often induce pruritus.

Why patients treated for cancer have pruritus?

Cancer patients may be affected by itching as a result of the cancer/neoplasm per se, associated dry skin or due to the anticancer drugs intake. Up to 50% of the people treated for cancer may experience pruritus related to their oncologic medication. In case of itching due to anticancer therapy, the mechanism of onset depends on the drug (chemotherapy, target therapy, endocrine therapy or immunotherapy).

How does pruritus appear, and what are the signs and symptoms?

When pruritus is attributed to anticancer drugs, it can occur without any other noticeable changes on your skin. However, repeated scratching can damage your skin and may cause:

- Excoriations and bleeding
- raised thick red areas (lichenification)
- crusts (scabs)
- bumps

- infections

You may feel itch all over your body or at a specific area. The itching can be mild to severe, affecting the every-day activities and your sleep.

Sometimes itching can be associated with other skin reactions to anticancer drugs, such as eczema, psoriasis, urticaria (hives) or xerosis (dry skin). In this case, you may notice on your skin abnormal-looking areas, such as scaly patches, redness, blisters or bullae.

How is pruritus treated?

Prevention, early recognition and treatment of pruritus induced by anticancer drugs are important to ensure an unimpeded anticancer therapy, avoiding dose modification or discontinuation.

Since the underlying cause of pruritus is the oncologic drug, the therapeutic efforts do not aim to elimination of the cause but to symptomatically relief you. It is also essential to correct dry skin if it is present.

Your doctor may prescribe topical medications to treat pruritus. Topical medications are those applied on your skin and may include:

- moisturizing creams/emollients
- anti-inflammatory products (steroids, calcineurin inhibitors)
- Antibiotics (medications that kill germs)

If your symptoms do not resolve with topical medication, your doctor may prescribe oral medications (medications you take by mouth), or photo-

therapy (Narrow-band Ultraviolet Radiation B therapy). Oral treatments of pruritus include:

- Antihistamines
- Gabapentinoids
- Neurokinine-1 receptor antagonists
- Immune-modulating agents
- Steroids
- Antidepressants

What is practical advice and preventive measures?

Dry skin is a common cause of pruritus in the context of anticancer medication and can be treated with moisturizing creams and topical therapies.

Preventive measures to avoid skin dryness:

- Avoid long baths; short showers with lukewarm water are preferable.
- Use mild cleansers
- Apply a fragrance-free skin moisturizer after the shower
- Prefer cotton-made, instead of synthetic or wooly, clothes.
- Refer to your doctor as soon as pruritus appears

While every effort has been made to ensure that the information given in this leaflet is accurate, not every treatment will be suitable or effective for every person. Your own clinician will be able to advise in greater detail.