For the Patient: Gemcitabine

Other names: GEMZAR®

BC Cancer Agency

- ***Gemcitabine*** (jem-SITE-a-been) is a drug that is used to treat some kinds of cancer. It is a clear liquid that is injected into a vein.

- A ***blood test*** may be taken before each treatment. The dose and timing of your chemotherapy may be changed based on the test results and/or other side effects.

- Other drugs such as warfarin (COUMADIN®) may ***interact*** with gemcitabine. Tell your doctor if you are taking this or other drugs as you may need extra blood tests or your dose may need to be changed. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before you start taking any new drugs.

- The ***drinking of alcohol*** (in small amounts) does not appear to affect the safety or usefulness of gemcitabine.

- Gemcitabine may damage sperm and may harm the baby if used during pregnancy. It is best to use ***birth control*** while being treated with gemcitabine. Tell your doctor right away if you or your partner becomes pregnant. Do not breast feed during treatment.

- ***Tell*** doctors or dentists that you are being treated with gemcitabine before you receive any treatment from them.

Side effects are listed in the following table in the order in which they may occur. Tips to help manage the side effects are included.

SIDE EFFECTS	MANAGEMENT
Nausea and vomiting may occur after your treatment and may last for 24 hours. It is usually mild to moderate.	You may be given a prescription for antinausea drug(s) to take before your chemotherapy treatment and/or at home. It is easier to prevent nausea than treat it once it has occurred, so follow directions closely. • Drink plenty of liquids. • Eat and drink often in small amounts. • Try the ideas in *Food Choices to Control Nausea.*

SIDE EFFECTS	MANAGEMENT
A **flu-like illness** may occur shortly after your treatment. You may have fever, chills, headache, muscle and joint aches. Flu-like symptoms usually disappear on their own.	• Take acetaminophen (eg, TYLENOL®) every 3-4 hours if needed. • Fever and chills, which occur more than 48 hours after treatment, may be signs of an infection. They should be reported to the doctor immediately. See details below.
Skin Rash may occur after treatment with gemcitabine. It is usually mild and is found on the arms, legs, chest, back or stomach. It may or may not be itchy.	• Apply hydrocortisone cream 0.5% sparingly 3-4 times daily.
Diarrhea may occur.	To help diarrhea: • Drink plenty of liquids. • Eat and drink often in small amounts. • Avoid high fibre foods as outlined in *Coping with Diarrhea.*
Your **white blood cells** will decrease 1-2 weeks after your treatment. They usually return to normal within 1 week. White blood cells protect your body by fighting bacteria (germs) that cause infection. When they are low, **you are at greater risk of having an infection.**	To help prevent infection: • Wash your hands often and always after using the bathroom. • Take care of your skin and mouth. • Avoid crowds and people who are sick. • Call your doctor ***immediately*** at the first sign of an infection such as fever (over 100°F or 38°C by an oral thermometer), chills, cough, or burning when you pass urine.

SIDE EFFECTS	MANAGEMENT
Your **platelets** may decrease 1-2 weeks after your treatment. They usually return to normal within 1 week. Platelets help to make your blood clot when you hurt yourself. **You may bruise or bleed more easily than usual.**	To help prevent bleeding problems: • Try not to bruise, cut, or burn yourself. • Clean your nose by blowing gently. Do not pick your nose. • Avoid constipation. • Brush your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush as your gums may bleed more easily. Maintain good oral hygiene. Some medications such as ASA (e.g., ASPIRIN®) or ibuprofen (e.g., ADVIL®) may increase your risk of bleeding. • Do not stop taking any medication that has been prescribed by your doctor (e.g., **ASA for your heart**). • For minor pain, try acetaminophen (e.g., TYLENOL®) first, but occasional use of ibuprofen may be acceptable.
Swelling of hands, feet or lower legs may occur if your body retains extra fluid.	If swelling is a problem: • Elevate your feet when sitting. • Avoid tight clothing.
Tiredness and lack of energy may occur.	• Do not drive a car or operate machinery if you are feeling tired. • Try the ideas in *Your bank of energy savings: How people with cancer can handle fatigue.*
Hair loss sometimes occurs with gemcitabine. Your hair will grow back once you stop treatment with gemcitabine. Colour and texture may change.	• Use a gentle shampoo and soft brush. • Care should be taken with use of hair spray, bleaches, dyes and perms.
Pain or tenderness may occur where the needle was placed.	• Apply cool compresses or soak in cool water for 15-20 minutes several times a day.

SEE YOUR DOCTOR OR GET EMERGENCY HELP IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE:

- Signs of an **infection** such as fever (over 100°F or 38°C by an oral thermometer); chills; cough; pain or burning when you pass urine.
- Signs of **bleeding problems** such as black, tarry stools; blood in urine; pinpoint red spots on skin.
- Signs of an **allergic reaction** soon after a treatment including dizziness, fast heart beat, face swelling or breathing problems.
- Signs of **lung problems** such as shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.

- Signs of **heart problems** such as fast or uneven heart beat.

SEE YOUR DOCTOR AS SOON AS POSSIBLE (DURING OFFICE HOURS) IF YOU HAVE:

- Signs of **anemia** such as unusual tiredness or weakness.
- Signs of **liver problems** such as yellow eyes or skin, white or clay-coloured stools.
- Signs of **kidney problems** such as lower back or side pain, swelling of feet or lower legs, numbness or tingling in feet or hands, blood in urine or cloudy urine.

CHECK WITH YOUR DOCTOR IF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONTINUE OR BOTHER YOU:

- Uncontrolled nausea, vomiting, constipation or diarrhea.
- Easy bruising or bleeding.
- Redness, swelling, pain or sores where the needle was placed.
- Redness, swelling, pain or sores on you lips, tongue, mouth or throat.
- Skin rash with or without itching.
- Excessive drowsiness.
- Aches and pains.

REPORT ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS TO YOUR DOCTOR