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Paclitaxel (Taxol®)

Paclitaxel is a [chemotherapy](#) drug that is given as a treatment for some types of cancer. It's also known as Taxol. It is mainly used to treat [ovarian](#) , [breast](#) and non-small cell [lung](#) cancer.

What Paclitaxel looks like

Paclitaxel is a colourless fluid.

How it is given

Paclitaxel may be given as a drip (infusion) in one of the following ways:

- through a fine tube (cannula) inserted into the vein
- through a fine plastic tube that is inserted under the skin into a vein near the collarbone ([central line](#))
- into a fine tube that is inserted into a vein in the crook of your arm ([PICC line](#)).

Chemotherapy is usually given as a course of several sessions (cycles) of treatment over a few months. The length of your treatment and the number of cycles you have will depend on the type of cancer for which you are being treated. Your nurse or doctor will discuss your treatment plan with you.

Possible side effects

Each person's reaction to chemotherapy is different. Some people have very few side effects, while others may experience more. The side effects described in this information will not affect everyone who is given paclitaxel and may be different if you are having more than one chemotherapy drug.

We have outlined the most common side effects as well as rarer ones, so that you can be aware of them if they occur. However, we have not included those that are very rare and therefore extremely unlikely to affect you. If you do notice any effects which you think may be due to paclitaxel, but which are not listed in this information, please discuss these with your doctor, chemotherapy nurse or pharmacist.

Lowered resistance to infection Paclitaxel can reduce the production of white blood cells by the bone marrow, making you more prone to [infection](#) . This effect can begin seven days after treatment has been given and your resistance to infection usually reaches its lowest point 10-14 days after chemotherapy. Your blood cells will then increase steadily and will usually have returned to normal levels before your next cycle of chemotherapy is due.

Contact your doctor or the hospital straight away if:

- your temperature goes above 38°C (100.4°F)
- you suddenly feel unwell (even with a normal temperature).

You will have a blood test before having more chemotherapy, to make sure that your cells have recovered. Occasionally it may be necessary to delay your treatment if the number of blood cells (the blood count) is still low.

Bruising or bleeding Paclitaxel can reduce the production of platelets (which help the blood to clot). Let your doctor know if you have any unexplained bruising or bleeding, such as nosebleeds, blood spots or rashes on the skin, and bleeding gums.

Anaemia (low number of red blood cells) While having treatment with paclitaxel you may become anaemic. This may make you feel tired and breathless. Let your doctor or nurse know if these symptoms are a problem.

Sore mouth and ulcers Your [mouth may become sore](#) , or you may notice small ulcers during this treatment. Drinking plenty of fluids, and cleaning your teeth regularly and gently with a soft toothbrush, can help to reduce the risk of this happening.

Tell your nurse or doctor if you have any of these problems, as they can prescribe special mouthwashes and medicines to prevent or clear any mouth infection.

Taste changes You may notice that your food tastes different. Normal taste will usually come back after the treatment finishes.

Diarrhoea This can usually be easily controlled with medicine but let your doctor know if it is severe or if it continues. It is important to drink plenty of fluids if you do have [diarrhoea](#) .

Tiredness and feeling weak You may feel very [tired](#) . It is important to allow yourself plenty of time to rest.

Hair loss This usually starts 2-3 weeks after the first dose of paclitaxel, although it may happen earlier. Hair usually falls out completely but it may just thin. You may also have thinning and loss of eyelashes, eyebrows and other body hair. This is temporary and your hair will regrow once the treatment is finished. Your nurse can give you advice about coping with [hair loss](#) .

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To help reduce hair loss, [scalp cooling](#) may be suitable for some people.

Aching or pain in joints and muscles This may occur a few days after paclitaxel is given. It does not usually last long and your doctor may prescribe painkillers or anti-inflammatory drugs to help.

Skin changes Paclitaxel can cause a rash, which may be itchy. Your doctor can prescribe medicine to help with this.

Numbness or tingling in hands or feet . This is due to the effect of paclitaxel on nerves and is known as [peripheral neuropathy](#) . You may also notice that you have difficulty doing up buttons or similar fiddly tasks. Tell your doctor if you notice any numbness or tingling in your hands or feet. This usually improves slowly a few months after the treatment is finished.

Headaches Some people find that paclitaxel causes headaches. Let your doctor know if you have headaches while having treatment.

Allergic reaction Signs of an allergic reaction include skin rashes and itching, a high temperature, shivering, redness of the face, a feeling of dizziness, headache, breathlessness, anxiety and a desire to pass urine. You will be monitored for any signs of an allergic reaction during the treatment. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any of these signs.

To help prevent the chance of an allergic reaction you will be given [steroid](#) tablets (usually dexamethasone) to take at home a number of hours before the paclitaxel. It's important to take them as directed and to tell your doctor or nurse if you forget. Instead of tablets the dexamethasone can sometimes be given by injection into a vein (intravenously) 30-60 minutes before the paclitaxel.

As well as the steroid, 30-60 minutes before the paclitaxel you will be given intravenous injections of an antihistamine, which helps to prevent an allergic reaction, and an antacid, which helps to stop the steroid damaging your stomach.

Feeling sick (nausea) and being sick (vomiting) If you do feel sick this may begin soon after the treatment is given and last for a few days. Your doctor can prescribe very effective anti-sickness (anti-emetic) drugs to prevent, or greatly reduce, [nausea and vomiting](#) . If the sickness isn't controlled, or continues, tell your doctor; they can prescribe other anti-sickness drugs which may be more effective. Some anti-sickness drugs can cause constipation. Let your doctor or nurse know if this is a problem.

Less common side effects

Low blood pressure Your blood pressure will be checked regularly during treatment. Tell your doctor know if you feel faint or dizzy.

Changes in heart rate Paclitaxel can sometimes cause a temporary slowing of the heart rate known as bradycardia. This usually does not cause any harm.

Your liver may be temporarily affected Paclitaxel may cause changes in the way that your liver works, though your liver will return to normal when the treatment is finished. This is very unlikely to cause you any harm, but your doctor will monitor this carefully. Samples of your blood will be taken from time to time to check your liver is working properly.

Abdominal pain This may start a few days after finishing the chemotherapy and may last for a few days. Your doctor can prescribe regular painkillers if it happens.

Additional information

Injection site While paclitaxel is being given, it can cause pain at the place where the injection is given, or along the vein. If you feel pain, tell your doctor or nurse. They can slow the drip down to reduce it.

Risk of blood clots Cancer can increase your risk of developing a blood clot (thrombosis), and having chemotherapy may increase this risk further. A blood clot may cause symptoms such as pain, redness and swelling in a leg, or breathlessness and chest pain. Blood clots can be very serious so it is important to tell your doctor straightaway if you have any of these symptoms. However, most clots can be treated with drugs to thin the blood. Your doctor or nurse can give you more information.

Other medicines Some medicines (including those you can buy in a shop or chemist) can be harmful to take when you are having chemotherapy. Let your doctor know about any medications you are taking, including non-prescribed drugs such as complementary therapies and herbal drugs.

Fertility Your ability to become pregnant or father a child may be affected by taking paclitaxel. It is important to discuss [fertility](#) with your doctor before starting treatment.

Contraception It's not advisable to become pregnant or father a child while taking paclitaxel, as the developing foetus may be harmed. It is important to use effective contraception while taking this drug, and for at least a few months afterwards. Again, discuss this with your doctor.

References

This section is based upon our Paclitaxel factsheet which has been compiled using information from a number of reliable sources, including:

- Eds. Sweetman et al. *Martindale: The Complete Drug Reference* . 36th edition. 2009. Pharmaceutical Press.
- British Medical Association and Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. *British National Formulary* . 58th edition. 2009.
- Medicines.org.uk website – www.medicines.org.uk (accessed October 2009).
- Ed. Perry. *The Chemotherapy Source Book*. 4th edition. 2007. Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.

For further references, please see general [bibliography](#) .

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