

# Gemcitabine (Gemzar<sup>®</sup>) for pancreatic cancer

This fact sheet is for people with pancreatic cancer who want to know more about the chemotherapy drug gemcitabine.

Each hospital may do things slightly differently, and treatment will vary depending on your cancer. Speak to your doctor or nurse about your treatment.

You can speak to our specialist nurses on our confidential Support Line about any questions you have about chemotherapy.  
Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email [nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)

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Read more about chemotherapy in our fact sheet:

**[Chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer](#)**

Or on our website at: **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapy](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapy)**

Read about the other chemotherapy drugs used for pancreatic cancer at: **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapydrugs](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapydrugs)**

# How is gemcitabine used?

Gemcitabine is one of the main chemotherapy drugs used to treat pancreatic cancer. It can be given on its own or with another chemotherapy drug called capecitabine (Xeloda®). This is known as GemCap:

- Gem – gemcitabine
- Cap – capecitabine.

GemCap can be used in different ways.

- If you have cancer that can be removed with surgery (such as the Whipple's procedure), you may be offered GemCap after surgery. The aim is to try to stop the cancer coming back.
- You may be offered GemCap if you have locally advanced or advanced pancreatic cancer and surgery is not possible. The aim is to try to control the growth of the cancer.

If you are not well enough to cope with GemCap you may be offered gemcitabine alone, as it may have fewer side effects.

Gemcitabine can also be given with the chemotherapy drug nab-paclitaxel (Abraxane®) to treat advanced pancreatic cancer. This is known as Gem/Abraxane.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about which chemotherapy may be best for you.

Read more about how chemotherapy is used in our fact sheet:

[Chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer](#)

Or on our website at: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapy](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemotherapy)

Read about capecitabine on our website at:

[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/capecitabine](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/capecitabine)

Read about nab-paclitaxel (Abraxane®) at:

[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/abraxane](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/abraxane)

# How is gemcitabine given?

You will have gemcitabine at the hospital as an outpatient. This means that you will go into hospital for treatment, but you will not need to stay overnight.

Gemcitabine is given in a four week cycle. This means you will have gemcitabine once a week for three weeks, and then have a break for a week. This break allows your body to recover. The number of cycles you have will depend on how the treatment is working, and how chemotherapy affects you. Your chemotherapy team can tell you more about this.

Gemcitabine is given as an infusion into a vein. You may hear an infusion called a 'drip'. You will have an infusion of gemcitabine through a cannula. This is a thin tube which is put into a vein in the back of your hand or lower arm. The infusion takes 30 minutes.

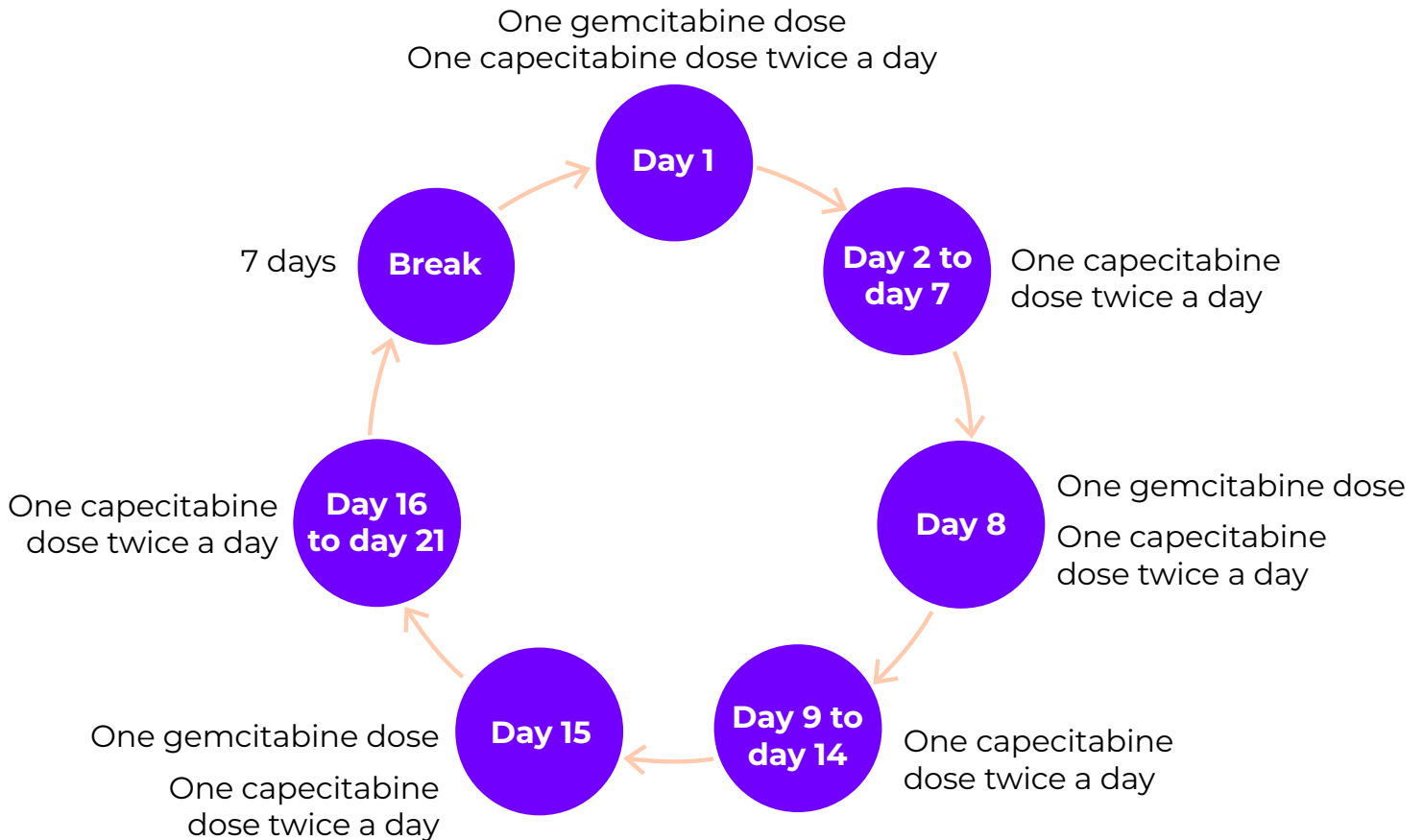
Read more about cannulas and see a diagram on our website at:

[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/havingchemotherapy](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/havingchemotherapy)

## Gemcitabine and capecitabine (GemCap)

If you are having gemcitabine together with capecitabine (GemCap), this is given in a four week cycle. You will have an infusion of gemcitabine once a week for three weeks. Capecitabine is taken as tablets, which you will take twice a day for the three weeks. You will then have a one week break before starting the next cycle.

## Diagram showing how GemCap is given



## Reaction to the chemotherapy

Some people have a reaction while gemcitabine is being given. Signs of a reaction are:

- an itchy rash
- high temperature
- feeling dizzy or faint
- feeling short of breath.

If you have any of these or any other unusual symptoms, tell your chemotherapy team, as a reaction needs treating straight away.

# What are the side effects of gemcitabine?

Gemcitabine can cause side effects. These can affect everyone differently and you may not get all the side effects mentioned here. Your chemotherapy team should tell you about any possible side effects and how they are managed. Ask them any questions you have. Most people cope well with gemcitabine but knowing what to expect can help you to deal with any side effects.

**Your chemotherapy team should give you a 24 hour emergency number to call if you are unwell or have any signs of infection.** Or if you need information about any side effects. Your oncology specialist nurse or chemotherapy nurse will explain when to use this number. If you haven't been given a number, ask them about this.

Read more about the side effects of chemotherapy in our fact sheet: [Chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer](#)

Or on our website at: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemoeffects](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/chemoeffects)

## Common side effects

### Infection

Gemcitabine can increase your risk of getting an infection. **An infection is an emergency if you are having chemotherapy, and needs treating straight away.** Signs of an infection include:

- a high or low temperature – your chemotherapy team will tell you what to watch out for
- feeling shivery and cold
- headaches
- sore muscles
- a cough or sore throat
- pain or burning when you pee
- feeling generally unwell or tired.

Call the 24 hour emergency number your chemotherapy team will have given you if you have signs of an infection. You should phone if you have any of these symptoms or feel suddenly unwell, even if your temperature is normal or low.

Read more about infections and how they can be treated in our fact sheet: [Chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer](#)

Or at: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/blood](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/blood)

## Flu-like symptoms

While you are being given gemcitabine you may get some flu-like symptoms, such as feeling hot, cold or shivery, and having a headache. If these symptoms happen within 24 hours of having an infusion of gemcitabine, they may be a side effect of gemcitabine. You should call the emergency number to check.

## Feeling or being sick (nausea or vomiting)

This is a common side effect of gemcitabine. You will be given anti-sickness medicines to stop you feeling or being sick. If these don't help, call the emergency number. You may be able to change to a different medicine.

Read more about feeling and being sick, and our tips for coping with it, on our website at: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/sickness](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/sickness)

## Fatigue (extreme tiredness)

Fatigue is a common side effect of gemcitabine. It is not the same as feeling tired. Fatigue can make you feel weak and have problems concentrating. Some people find that the fatigue starts a few hours to a few days after having chemotherapy and starts to get better a few days later. See how the chemotherapy affects you and work out how much activity you can manage. There are things that can help with fatigue.

Read our tips for coping with fatigue on our website at: [pancreaticcancer.org.uk/fatigue](http://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/fatigue)

## Runny poo (diarrhoea)

If you have diarrhoea, try to drink as much water as you can manage. Call the 24 hour emergency number if you have diarrhoea more than four times a day or are finding it hard to drink enough fluids. They can give you medicines to control the diarrhoea.

Read our tips for coping with diarrhoea on our website at:  
[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/tipspoo](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/tipspoo)

## Constipation

Constipation is when you find it harder to poo. Drink as much water as you can manage and try to eat foods that are high in fibre, such as fruit and vegetables. Gentle exercise such as walking can also help. Speak to your doctor about medicines that can help.

## Anaemia (low red blood cells)

Gemcitabine can lower the number of red blood cells in your blood. This is called anaemia and can make you feel tired, dizzy or short of breath. If any of these symptoms happen suddenly, call the 24 hour emergency number. If your red blood cell level is very low, you may need to be given a blood transfusion through a drip.

## Bruising and bleeding

Gemcitabine can lower the number of platelets in your blood. This is called thrombocytopenia. It can make you bruise more easily than normal, and you may be more likely to have nosebleeds or bleeding gums. If you have a nosebleed that does not stop after five minutes, call the 24 hour emergency number.

## Swelling (oedema)

Some people get swelling in their feet, ankles, legs, fingers or face. This is because of a build-up of fluid, which is called oedema. If you have swelling in your feet, it may help to have your legs up on a cushion when you are sitting down. Tell your doctor or nurse, as they may also give you medicines to help.

## Appetite loss

During your treatment you may not feel like eating, and you may start to lose weight. Try to eat small meals often. If your appetite does not get better after a few days, tell your doctor or dietitian.

Read our tips for coping with loss of appetite on our website at:  
[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diettips](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/diettips)

## Sore mouth and mouth ulcers

Gemcitabine can make your mouth sore, or cause mouth ulcers which can be painful. Tell your chemotherapy team about any mouth problems. They can make sure you don't have a mouth infection and give you a mouthwash to help. You should also tell them if you have white spots in your mouth. This is a sign of oral thrush, which is normally easy to treat.

## Hair loss

Gemcitabine may cause your hair to thin but it should grow back once your treatment stops.

## Effects on the kidneys and liver

Gemcitabine can affect how your kidneys and liver work. You will have regular blood tests to check this. It usually goes back to normal after treatment ends.

## Less common side effects

### Severe breathing problems

Gemcitabine can cause problems with your lungs, but this is very rare. If you feel short of breath or have a dry cough that will not go away, call your chemotherapy team. You may need to have some tests to check how your lungs are working.

### Heart problems

Gemcitabine can cause an irregular heartbeat. It can also make you feel short of breath or dizzy. If you have any of these symptoms, call the 24 hour emergency number. Or go to A&E and tell them that you are having chemotherapy.

If you have any questions about gemcitabine or side effects, speak to your chemotherapy team. You can also speak to our specialist nurses on our free Support Line.



# More information and support

## We are here for you

If you or someone you care about has pancreatic cancer, we are here to help.

Find out more at: **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/support](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/support)**

## Our specialist nurse Support Line

Our specialist nurses are experts in pancreatic cancer. They can talk for as long as you need, as often as you like. Whether you have a long list of questions or don't know where to start, they will provide practical, honest information to help you make the right choice for you.

Call free on **0808 801 0707** or email **[nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:nurse@pancreaticcancer.org.uk)**

## Information about pancreatic cancer

Our website, videos and publications can answer your questions. The information can help you understand what you have heard from your medical team, and make decisions about your treatment and care.

Go to: **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/information](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/information)**

Download or order our free publications at:

**[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/publications)** or call **0808 801 0707**

## Real life stories

Whether you want to read other people's stories or tell your own, sharing experiences of pancreatic cancer could help.

Go to: **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/stories](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/stories)**

## Webinars

Our regular webinars cover topics including diet, wellbeing and treatment. They are hosted by our friendly nurses and other experts, are informal, and you can ask questions. You can look back at previous sessions, or sign up to one.

Go to: **[pancreaticcancer.org.uk/webinars](https://pancreaticcancer.org.uk/webinars)**

## Useful organisations

### Cancer Focus Northern Ireland

**cancerfocusni.org**

**Nurse line: 0800 783 3339** (Mon, Weds, Fri, 9am-1pm)

Care and support for people affected by cancer and their families in Northern Ireland.

### Cancer Research UK

**cancerresearchuk.org**

**Helpline: 0808 800 4040** (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm)

Information for anyone affected by cancer.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

**macmillan.org.uk**

**Support Line: 0808 808 0000** (7 days a week, 8am-8pm)

Provide practical, medical and financial support for anyone affected by cancer.

### Maggie's

**maggies.org**

**Tel: 0300 123 1801**

Centres around the UK and online offer free, comprehensive support for anyone affected by cancer.

### Tenovus Cancer Care

**tenovuscancercare.org.uk**

**Tel: 0808 808 1010**

Advice and support for people affected by cancer in Wales.

## **This fact sheet has been produced by the Support and Information Team at Pancreatic Cancer UK.**

We make every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, accurate information about pancreatic cancer. We hope this will add to the medical advice you have had, and help you make decisions about your treatment and care. This information should not replace advice from the medical team – please speak to your doctor, nurse or other members of your medical team about any questions.

Email us at [publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk) for references to the sources of information used to write this fact sheet.

### **Give us your feedback**

We hope you have found this information helpful. We are always keen to improve our information, so let us know if you have any comments or suggestions. Email us at [publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk](mailto:publications@pancreaticcancer.org.uk) or write to our Information Manager at the address below.

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