

Chemotherapy, Surgery, Radiotherapy, Treatment and Hospital Stay Tips



Chemotherapy can cause different side effects in different people. Your chemotherapy treatment may change the way you feel about yourself. Below are some health and beauty tips to help you feel and look better during chemotherapy. Remember to check with your doctor what is best for you. Pink Hope members who have undergone chemotherapy provided the content of this document.

Pre-Surgery Tips

- Each time you are seeing a surgeon, ensure that you have a list of questions written down as it can be quite overwhelming.
- If there is someone that can attend the appointment with you, bring them! It can be difficult to process all the information on your own.
- Take a notebook and pen and take notes (or ask your support person). Categorise your notebook into sections such as Breast Surgeon, Plastic Surgeon and Medical Oncologist (if you have one).
- Keep yourself busy on the week leading up to your surgery, such as cleaning the house or meal preparation. This can help to relieve anxiety and it's great to have home cooked meals prepared rather than having to eat the hospital food.
- If you ask for permission, you may be able to record the meeting using your phone.
- Ask for copies of all of your results and keep them together in a folder.
- If you are unhappy with the advice given by the surgeon, seek a second opinion.
- If you can avoid it, don't pay for parking. It can be expensive. Arrive early to your first appointment and have a look for free parking.
- If you are travelling more than 100 KMs you may be reimbursed for your petrol and accommodation.
- Always research your different surgery options and ask your surgeon to see results of the different types of surgery.
- Ensure you are eating a healthy diet and exercising before surgery.
- Strength training can be incredibly beneficial both pre and post-surgery (once your surgeon gives you the all clear of course!)
- Stock your fridge by cooking and freezing some meals for when you return home.
- Consider buying a wedge pillow for when you return from hospital. There are some great options at Ishka or Aldi.
- Consider having a boob-voyage party! This can be a fun idea that puts a bit of a spin on what can otherwise be a very traumatic event.
- Sit down and write a list of all the items you will need a week before your surgery, so you can spend the week stocking up.
- Ask your surgeon for a medical certificate if you are studying or working.
- Reach out to support groups, remember that you are not in this alone! This financial year, 18,000 women alone were diagnosed with Breast Cancer. That's a big number! Although there are different types of Breast Cancer and it affects people differently, it's somewhat comforting to know that there are others out there who are in the same boat! There are online support groups through organisations' websites you can reach out to. Even reaching out to different hospitals can lead to a referral for a face to face support group. Your hospital's Breast Care Nurse can also be helpful! Just remember that you are not alone in this!
- Lastly, take the time to do something you love. Whether it be going out and exploring, pampering yourself or staying in and watching movie. Recovery can take its toll on you, mentally and physically, so
- self-care is important.



Post-Surgery Tips.

It will be up to individual choice where you decide to sleep after your surgery. Some people prefer a reclining chair. I slept in my bed, but I brought a number of small pillows to put around my body.

- Gentle exercise is very important once you have approval from your doctor. I walked only for small periods of time and then gradually built my strength up to go for longer walks.
- Buy a thermometer. It is very important to take your temperature after surgery, especially if you are feeling unwell.
- If you would like to go to the shopping centre but are unable to walk for long periods of time, most of the larger centres have free wheelchair hire.
- Ensure that you have lots of loose fitting clothing and zip-up hoodies.
- As I had the DIEP surgery, I found it difficult to stand for long periods of time. I used a plastic garden chair in the shower for the first week after surgery.
- When travelling in the car, bring a pillow for the seatbelt.
- If you have private health insurance, post-mastectomy bras may be covered so look into this.
- The pharmacy team will normally visit you before you're discharged, to go through your take-home medications. If you live with someone, ask them to take note of any medications you may already have and let the pharmacy team know. I did the mistake of taking all medications home only to realise that I had 4 of them already. \$90.00 gone! It's important to take the medication as recommended but if you notice that there is medication making you feel really unwell, contact the hospital and request to speak to someone from the pharmacy team and go through it with them.
- Before you're discharged, enquire about how your drainage tube will be looked after. You may have some at-home nurses coming to visit you to check everything, or you may have to go in. This depends on the hospital you've had or are having your procedure at.
- Have a long list of TV shows, a good book or some movies you'd like to catch up on. Trying to keep yourself distracted can be quite difficult and recovery can be quite depressing. It's important to self-reflect and think about how far you've come. It's also important to keep your mind busy, so if you can find a way to do that, then do it! I found that colouring in books wasn't really my thing, but it was a good opportunity to binge watch new TV series on Netflix.

Chemotherapy Tips.

- It is recommended that you exercise before chemotherapy to help lower the side effects.
- Depending on the type of chemotherapy you are having, you may be there for quite a while. Bring some snacks with you.
- Bring a drink bottle and drink lots of water. It is important to do this to flush away the chemotherapy.
- Keep a list of symptoms after your chemotherapy and share these with your oncologist. They will try their best to give helpful suggestions or scripts for medicines you can take
- You may like to try a cold cap to prevent hair loss during chemotherapy. It is not 100% guaranteed that you will keep your hair, but this is a great option for some patients.
- Ensure that you wear a loose-fitting jumper in winter so that the nurse can access your veins, if this becomes difficult you may like to consider getting a port.
- Having your hair fall out can be very traumatic. You may decide to shave it off which for me was the best option. I didn't want too many people there though. I just had my husband and family friend who is a hairdresser.



- Get addicted to hats and scarfs! It can be very fun to go shopping for different hats and scarfs. Stock up before you start chemotherapy.
- Check with your private health insurer as they may cover part of the cost of a wig.
- You may go back to work or you may decide to stay home during chemotherapy. If you choose to stay at home, keep yourself busy. If you are feeling well enough, go out for coffee with friends! Otherwise, buy some good books and invest in Netflix!
- You may feel major stress or anxiety post-surgery and during your chemotherapy. There are many tools for stress-relief that can be beneficial such as listening to motivational music, keeping a journal, deep breathing, inspirational reading and mindfulness.
- Scalp cooling or cooling cap was offered as an option to before I started chemotherapy and I managed to somehow "survive" 12 weeks of it. It was one of the most painful things that I had to endure. Prior to starting, I cut my hair really short and decided to go crazy and dye it pink! I figured it might fall out anyways, so why not. The cap would start 1 hour prior to starting chemotherapy and one hour after I finished my treatment in order for it to be effective. Towards the end of the treatment, my hair started to thin but I didn't lose it. It all depends on how your body reacts to it and the strength of the drug. One month post completing my 12 weeks of treatment, my eyelashes and eyebrows all fell out. The nurses were great in trying to assist me with managing the pain. They tried a number of things from Panadol to Valium but neither worked and it all came down to mentality.
- Veins tend to disappear when you start treatment and when nurses try to find your veins, it can be quite painful, so have a chat with your oncologist about potentially getting an access port put in. There are different types of ports so it's worth doing some research to find out the best option for you.
- If you decide to continue working or studying throughout your treatment, ensure that your manager is on the same page with you and they have a full understanding of what it's going to be like. You might feel fine and work throughout the entire treatment or you might decide that it's not working as well as you'd hoped. Ensure that that you're actively communicating with your employer/teacher about what's going on.

Tips During Radiotherapy.

1. I had 25 rounds of Radiotherapy on the chest wall of the affected breast so I knew that I was in for a gruelling regime of laying on my back, with my arm up trying not to move. I documented every day by taking photos so that I could see at what point my skin colour started to change. I found that doing this helped me mentally.
2. The process itself didn't hurt but it was scary having to lay under a really big machine and letting it do what it had to do, so the radiotherapists allowed me to make a Spotify playlist which they played while I laid there. It helped keep me distracted by what was actually going on.
3. When I started Radiotherapy, my steaming hot showers had to stop. The warmest I could go was lukewarm which was recommended by the nurses. The radiotherapy machine will cause "radiotherapy burns" and having hot showers would only make it worse.
4. When my skin started to discolour, the nurses recommended I start putting Vitamin E cream every day to which they provided.
5. As my skin progressively got worse, I regularly saw the nurse in the radiation department where they would keep track of my wounds. They provided me with Solugel and some mesh to protect the skin. It did begin to crack and bleed towards the end so maintaining it was important. Ensure that you fully understand the nurse regarding dressing your wounds.



6. I found that dressing my wound consisted of Solugel, mesh, soft dressing and a compression to keep it all together. I had to ensure that I wore my non-favourite tops that I didn't mind getting dirty as the gel can seep through clothing. See how your body reacts during radiotherapy, you might not need to do any of this!
7. If at any given time you get a temperature of 37 or higher, then to go to the hospital. Having a temperature while you have wounds means you're at a risk of infection so it's recommended to seek professional medical help.
8. Fatigue really affected more so during radiotherapy then chemotherapy so I did my best to do my walks but there were moments I struggled getting out bed. Having something to motivate you really helped with day to day life.

We asked two Pink Hope Community members what they helped get them through their stay in hospital! Here's the top things they couldn't live without!

Things I Couldn't Live Without in Hospital.

1. **Comfortable bras-** I was given a mastectomy bra when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It had several hooks on the front and I found it very annoying and uncomfortable. I was recommended by a friend to go to Kmart and buy some zip up bras. The zip is at the front and these bras are great for when you are in hospital as the nurses need to check your breasts many times throughout the day. These bras were only 2 for \$20. I also bought bras that were a size too big as your breasts are often swollen after surgery.
2. **High wisted undies-** This may only be suitable for those who have DIEP surgery like myself. Kmart sell a 5 pack for \$10 which were perfectly fine for me. You may also like to look at buying a pair of Spanx.
3. **A nice dressing gown-** Treat yourself to a pretty dressing gown. They have some beautiful ones at Suzanne's or Peter Alexander. They are great, particularly for the first few days for easy access for doctors and nurses when they need to check your breasts.
4. **Drain bags-** They may provide you with these at the hospital, but you may like to buy some with a pretty pattern yourself. You can find them by googling patterned sling bags on the internet.
5. **Mindfulness apps-** I used Smiling Mind and Headspace. These apps are great for relieving anxiety both in hospital and at home. Practising deep breathing will help with your recovery.
6. **An Ipod or playlists made using Spotify-** My husband made me two hospital mixes! One was more relaxing and the other had upbeat songs.
7. **Personal hygiene items-** I packed deodorant, face and body wipes, a small bottle of perfume, a small bottle of body wash, lip balm and a razor.
8. **My own water bottle with a straw.**
9. **Magazines-** I was way too tired to read a book so instead enjoyed catching up on the latest gossip.
10. **Snacks like lollies and chocolate.**



Things I Couldn't Live Without in Hospital.

1. **My teddy bear!** I've had my teddy bear since I was 1 and I wasn't letting go of him anytime soon, so I made sure I packed him on my hospital trip! If you have something that makes you feel safe and comfortable, I'd recommend taking it with you.
2. **2 Different types of PJ's.** Winter and summer. Temperature in hospital can vary, so I always had two sets that would allow me to mix and match.
3. **Slippers!** I walked a lot in hospital, so investing in a good pair of slippers you can slip on (not Ugg boots that you have to pull on) was really handy.
4. I wasn't able to wash my hair for a while, so lots of **hair ties and dry shampoo** came in handy. I figure if I tied it up, no one would really notice.
5. Other toiletries such as **shampoo and conditioner** (hey, kudos to you if you can do it!), toothbrush and tooth paste. **Facial cleanser and moisturising cream and lip balm.** Your lips will crack and your skin will get very dry especially with the ventilation in the hospital. Also, **body wash!**
6. **My laptop and laptop charger.** I played computer games which helped keep me distracted but you could use it for anything else such as listening to music, organising your folders, watching movies or TV shows.
7. Cannot forget the **phone charger!** That's pretty much self-explanatory.
8. I packed some **bed socks** but I didn't end up using them as I had the compression socks the hospital gave me.
9. **Wheat bag.** The hospital provided heat packs but they cooled down quite quickly, so having my wheat bag there made my stay slightly more comfortable.
10. **Drainage tube bag.** The hospital can provide you with some colourful ones but if you want to pick your own, you can purchase them online.
11. **Headphones,** I have a pair of wireless headphones which came in handy, especially as I used my laptop quite a bit.
12. **Tea!** I drank lots of herbal tea so I brought some from home. The hospital will have the standard peppermint and black tea but if you drink lots of herbal tea then I recommend taking it.





CONTACT

info@pinkhope.org.au

PO Box 725, Narrabeen NSW 2101



pinkhope.org.au