
Frequently asked questions

- ***What is cancer?***
- ***What is chemotherapy?***
- ***What is immunotherapy?***
- ***What is hormone-therapy?***

What is cancer?

Cancer is not just a single disease, but a set of various forms of tumours (more than a hundred). In simple words cancer is a term used for diseases in which abnormal cells growth form masses of variable dimension that can spread locally by invasion of neighbouring organs or can disseminate to other parts of the body, creating the so-called “secondary” or “metastatic” tumours.

In general, there are two big groups of malignant tumours:

- Solid tumours (carcinomas or sarcomas) represent a cluster of cells grouped between them, which form a mass. The cells can leave this mass and form secondary masses in other parts of the body (metastases).
- Tumours of the haematopoietic systems (lymphoma, myeloma, leukaemia). These tumours commonly develop in the bone marrow or the lymph nodes and can spread usually much faster, especially to the blood, but also to other parts of the body.
- Tumours in children develop and are usually treated in a different way comparing to adults. In Ticino there is a Paediatric Onco-Haematology Service within the Department of Paediatrics at Ospedale San Giovanni in Bellinzona.

For more information about cancer we recommend the website of “Lega Ticinese Contro il Cancro” (Tessin League Against Cancer), a non-for-profit organisation that contributes to the fight against cancer.

What is chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is one of the multiple forms of cancer treatment. It uses drugs that have the purpose to interrupt the growth of cancer cells, wherever they are located. Chemotherapy may be administered in the form of pills or it can be given by the intravenous or subcutaneous routes. There are a least fifty different chemotherapy drugs, often administered in combination. Chemotherapy can also be combined to other forms of cancer therapy such as radiotherapy, hormonotherapy, immunotherapy or surgery.

For more specific questions about chemotherapy, how it works, how it is administered and what are possible side effects, we recommend asking your oncologist. All the necessary information for patients can be found on the website of the “Lega Ticinese Contro il Cancro” (Tessin League Against Cancer), a non-for-profit organisation that contributes to the fight against cancer.



What is immunotherapy?

Immunotherapy is a form of cancer treatment that manipulates the immune system to inhibit cell growth or destroy malignant cells. The immune system is an integral part of our body which protects us from external aggressions such as viral, bacterial, fungal or other types of infections. Our immune system usually detects and destroy tumour cells, but in certain cases the tumour becomes stronger and manages to grow despite the immune system activity. With the help of the recent advances in therapeutic techniques our immune system can be helped to combat cancer by means of the following:

- Antibodies produced in the laboratory which act against certain specific tumours (e.g. lymphoma, tumours of the intestine, breast tumours, etc.).
- Drugs that stimulate or restore the ability of body's immune system (e.g. interferon, interleukin-2).
- Transplant of immunologic cells from a donor to a cancer patient (called allotransplant).
- Antitumor vaccines, which stimulate the production of antitumor antibodies.

For more information about this type of therapy we recommend asking your oncologist or visiting the website of the "Lega Ticinese Contro il Cancro" (Tessin League Against Cancer), a non-for-profit organisation that contributes to the fight against cancer.

What is hormone-therapy?

Is a form of treatment based on hormonal manipulation, which includes the administration either of hormones or drugs which block the activity of normal hormones.

These treatments proved to be particularly effective for tumours originated from tissues that are normally regulated by the normal hormonal system, such as the breast, prostate and uterus. The main purpose is blocking the effect of sex hormones (estrogens, testosterone). In some cases it is necessary to administer hormones which may have an inhibitory effect on tumour tissues (e.g. progestin, testosterone in special cases).

If you would like to learn more about hormonotherapy we recommend discussing it with your oncologist or visiting the website of the "Lega Ticinese Contro il Cancro" (Tessin League Against Cancer), a non-for-profit organisation that contributes to the fight against cancer.