



York Teaching Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Chemotherapy and Scalp Cooling

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

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Caring with pride

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## Introduction

This leaflet has been written to provide you with information if you are considering having scalp cooling whilst receiving chemotherapy. It is not meant to replace the discussion between you and your medical team, but as a guide to be used together with what you have already discussed.

## **What is Scalp Cooling?**

Scalp cooling is a way of reducing the amount of hair lost during your chemotherapy treatment. Remember not all types of chemotherapy will cause hair loss. We will discuss your chemotherapy with you and explain more about hair loss on an individual basis.

At the moment, scalp cooling is the only known method of reducing hair loss during chemotherapy treatment.

## **How does Scalp Cooling help?**

Some anti-cancer drugs (chemotherapy drugs) affect the hair follicles and cause your hair to fall out. It works by cooling your scalp so that the blood supply to the hair follicles is reduced, thus the activity in these cells is slower. These two effects together mean that less chemotherapy reaches the hair follicles. If less of the drugs reach these follicles less hair will fall out.

## **Who can have Scalp Cooling?**

There are lots of different types of chemotherapy drugs. Scalp cooling will only work for a few types of these. For scalp cooling to work, the chemotherapy drug(s) you are receiving must leave your body quickly. These drugs are said to have a 'short half-life'. The nurses in the chemotherapy unit will be able to tell you if scalp cooling could work for you. Unfortunately we are currently unable to offer scalp cooling if you are having your treatment on the Mobile Chemotherapy Unit.

## **What does Scalp Cooling involve?**

Your scalp will be cooled below its normal temperature so it will feel cold and it may be a little uncomfortable. This is done using a cap which is attached to a cooling machine; this is put onto your head up to 30 minutes before the chemotherapy is given to you. It will stay on whilst the drug(s) are being given and for some time after your treatment session has finished.

The length of time the cap has to stay on after your treatment has finished will depend on the chemotherapy drug(s) being used. The time can range from one to five hours, but the average time is between two and four hours.

## **What will Scalp Cooling feel like?**

To start with, scalp cooling feels very cold and some patients say uncomfortable. This feeling does not last for long. After a few minutes the feeling reduces to being bearable and for most manageable. Scalp cooling can be stopped at any time if you want it to.

You are welcome to take your preferred painkiller before leaving home as this can help the discomfort you will experience. Please discuss what painkiller you would wish to take with your chemotherapy nurse to ensure it is safe to take along with your chemotherapy and other treatments

## **Will Scalp Cooling work?**

How well scalp cooling works for you will depend on things such as the thickness and length of your hair and the type of drug(s) you are having. Generally speaking scalp cooling works well. However, most patients experience some thinning of their hair. A few patients experience significant hair loss, if this is a concern your chemotherapy nurse can then refer you for a NHS wig.

## What are the risks of using Scalp Cooling?

There is a theoretical risk of developing a secondary cancer deposit in the scalp. This is because the chemotherapy will work less effectively in the area being cooled. However, this is extremely rare. Scalp cooling will not affect the treatment to the cancer cells in the rest of your body. This can be a bigger risk for those patients who are being treated for a haematological condition. Therefore, we do not offer scalp cooling to Haematology patients.

Please be aware that there may be occasions where the nurses suggest that you stop using the scalp cooling technique. This may be because they notice it is starting to affect other aspects of your treatment (for example, if it is affecting your veins). If you feel that it is making you feel unwell, then you may also be advised to stop using the scalp cooling equipment.

## **What happens before Scalp Cooling begins?**

Your organic or pH neutral / balanced conditioner is applied to your wet hair. The cooling cap comes in several sizes to ensure a good fit. The cooling cap is placed on your head and attached to the cooling machine for about 30 minutes before you are given the chemotherapy. The machine cools your scalp down and then keeps an even temperature whilst you are receiving your chemotherapy.

We would like you to bring your own conditioner and a comb in with you on the day of your appointment for chemotherapy. You may use any organic or pH neutral / balanced conditioner.

You may wish to bring some warm clothing and a blanket with you for warmth throughout your treatment.



## **What happens when Scalp Cooling has finished?**

When the cooling cap is removed your hair may be damp. There will be some hair conditioner left on your hair. We suggest the conditioner is gently washed out the evening after treatment using tepid water.

Treat your hair as gently as possible whilst you are receiving chemotherapy. Use a pH balanced shampoo and conditioner, preferably an un-perfumed one and use minimal hair styling products. You should avoid heated hair appliances such as hair dryers, curling tongs and straightening irons.

You may wish to bring a warm hat to wear when you leave the department.

## Using Hair Dyes

Hair colouring products should be avoided whilst you are having chemotherapy and undergoing scalp cooling. It is understandable that you might wish to dye your hair after you have finished treatment.

Six weeks after treatment, as long as your hair is in good condition and your scalp is not itchy or sore, you may discuss using natural hair colouring products (such as vegetable based dyes) with your hairdresser. They may suggest using a vegetable based colour, as these are gentler on the hair than conventional dyes. Because of this they may be more inclined to use these on your hair following treatment. Even when using a natural dye it is worth patch testing on a small section of your hair before using it first to make sure that it will not damage your hair.

However, it is best to **avoid using chemical based hair dyes or perms for six months after chemotherapy**, as they contain chemicals that can damage your hair. Your scalp may be drier and itchier than normal during this time, using strong chemicals can make your hair worse. When you are recovering from having chemotherapy your hair is more fragile than usual, so it is more likely to get damaged. It can take around six months for the hair to become stronger again.

## **Tell us what you think of this leaflet**

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

The Chemotherapy Nursing Team, in The Magnolia Centre, The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone 01904 726516.

## **Teaching, training and research**

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email [pals@york.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@york.nhs.uk).

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Providing care together in York, Scarborough, Bridlington,  
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