

**Fact sheet**

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# Advanced Kidney Cancer – Dealing with the side effects of medication: targeted therapy

## Introduction

Our series of kidney cancer fact sheets have been developed to help you understand more about kidney cancer. This fact sheet provides information about some of the common side effects of targeted therapy and how to deal with them. Targeted therapies include tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) and mammalian target of rapamycin (mTORs) medications.

For more information relating to other aspects of kidney cancer please see our other fact sheets:

- Kidney Cancer
- Diagnosis and Types of Kidney Cancer
- Localised Kidney Cancer
- Advanced Kidney Cancer
- Support for Kidney Cancer
- Kidney Cancer – Make the most of your visit to the doctor

These fact sheets are meant as an introduction only and are not meant to be a substitute for your doctor's or healthcare professional's advice. Always consult your doctor or healthcare professional for more advice.

## What are side effects?

A side effect is a secondary and normally unwanted effect of a treatment or medication. All medications can cause side effects, although not everybody gets them. If they do occur, they may be minor and temporary. However, some may be more serious and need medical attention.

**It is important to remember you may have no side effects, you may have mild side effects or your side effects may be more serious. Everyone is different.**

## What should I do before starting a medication?

Before you start taking a medication talk to your doctor or nurse about possible side effects.

You may find it useful to get a diary to record any side effects and how bad they are, and take it to your medical appointments.



## What should I do while taking a medication?

If you do notice any side effects do not delay in telling your doctor or other healthcare professional so they can help you manage them. Often if you do something about a side effect quickly it won't get any worse.

Don't stop taking your medication because of side effects until you talk with your doctor or healthcare professional.

You may decide that the side effects of treatment outweigh the benefits of continuing treatment. If you feel that this is true for you, talk to your doctor about trying a different medication or stopping treatment all together.

## What are the common side effects of kidney cancer medications?

Here is a list of common side effects:

- Fatigue
- Taste problems
- Mouth problems
- Hand and foot problems
- Skin and nail problems
- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Fluid retention (oedema)
- Cough and shortness of breath

It is important to remember that you may not have any side effects, you may have one or more of the side effects listed here, or you may have a side effect not listed here. All side effects can vary from very minor to more serious.

## What can I do to manage my side effects?

On the next few pages is a table of some of the common side effects of medicines for kidney cancer. For each side effect given there is a list of:

- some of the symptoms you may experience
- things you can do to reduce the severity of the side effect
- things that you should avoid as they may make the side effects worse, and
- things your doctor may suggest you do to help reduce the side effects.

To help you manage your side effects, you could consider putting together a *self-care kit* with some or all of the following items:

- Lip balm – water or aloe-based lip balm
- Fragrance free hand and foot creams
- Mild, soap-free cleansing bars
- Body lotion
- Fragrance-free shower gel
- Soft-bristle toothbrush
- Non-abrasive toothpaste
- Cotton gloves
- SPF 30+ sunscreen for sensitive skin

The suggestions may not necessarily work for you and always remember to consult your doctor or other healthcare professional for more advice.

## Fatigue

### Causes

- The kidney cancer itself
- Medications
- Emotional drain of coping with cancer

### Experience

- More tired than normal
- Completely worn out/exhausted
- No energy
- Can't concentrate

### ✓ Do

- Prioritise your tasks
- Ask your family and friends to help
- Take short rest periods throughout the day
- Take short naps (30–45mins) as long as they don't interfere with night sleep
- Try to get some gentle exercise every day
- Plan activities and exercise for when your energy levels are highest
- Reschedule activities if you are too tired
- Talk to your employers about adjustments to work load if needed

### ✗ Don't

- Overfill your day
- Take long naps during the day
- Drive or operate machinery if you are tired
- Drink caffeine or alcohol before bed
- Smoke before bed

### What your doctor may do

- A blood test to check for anemia and thyroid problems
- Change the time your medication is taken

## Hand & foot problems

### Causes

- Medication

### Experience

Mild to moderate symptoms:

- Redness, swelling, tingling, burning, numbness, tenderness, rash

Severe symptoms:

- Cracked, flaking or peeling skin, blisters, ulcers, sores, severe pain causing difficulties walking or using your hands

### ✓ Do

- Visit a podiatrist prior to starting treatment and during treatment
- Have a manicure and pedicure prior to starting treatment and during treatment
- Wear properly fitting footwear with insoles
- Wear comfortable slippers indoors
- Use a soap free cleaning-bar
- Pat dry and do not rub
- Apply fragrance free creams gently and regularly
- Wear cotton gloves and socks
- Use a cold compress (such as a bag of frozen peas) for 15 minutes to relieve symptoms

### ✗ Don't

- Wear rubber gloves
- Take hot baths, showers or expose yourself to the sun
- Use harsh chemicals such as cleaning and laundry products
- Do activities that put stress on your hands and feet such as jogging, long walks, using tools that need a strong grip
- Wear tight fitting shoes, socks, jewellery
- Break blisters as they may become infected

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe steroid creams or tablets
- Prescribe pain medication
- Alter your medication
- Refer you to a dermatologist or podiatrist

## Skin & nail problems

### Causes

- Medication

### Experience

- Dry, red or flaky skin
- Burning or warm sensation of skin
- Itching skin
- Thin brittle hair, hair loss, hair colour changes
- Scalp itchiness or flaking
- Weak, tender, ridged nails

### ✓ Do

- Use sun screen (at least SPF 30) whenever outside and reapply every 2 hours
- Protect your skin against extreme heat or cold
- Wear a hat outside
- Wear loose fitting clothing
- Apply fragrance free creams gently and regularly
- Use a soap-free cleansing bar or fragrance free shower gel
- Use anti-dandruff shampoos
- Wear a scarf, hat or wig if you have hair loss
- Brush hair gently
- Keep nails short
- Massage and soak nails with vegetable or olive oil
- Report any signs of skin or nail infection (redness, swelling, warmth) to your doctor or nurse

### ✗ Don't

- Go in the sun during peak hours of 11am to 3pm
- Use hot water for baths or showers
- Use chlorinated pools or hot tubs
- Use alcohol based, fragranced products
- Use hair dryers and hair dyes
- Have artificial nails
- Cut your cuticles

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe medicated creams, steroid tablets, antibiotics
- Refer you to a dermatologist
- Prescribe a wig

## Taste problems

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### Causes

- Medication

### Experience

- Bitter, metallic or chemical taste when eating
- Unable to tolerate the taste of some foods

### ✓ Do

- Make a food diary and try different types of food and drinks to see which foods you can tolerate
- Cold foods may be better than hot foods
- Use a straw to get drinks to the back of your mouth
- Use plastic cutlery and plates
- Brush your teeth with a soft bristled brush before and after meals

### ✗ Don't

- Eat hot foods
- Smoke

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe zinc supplements

## Mouth problems

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### Causes

- Medication

### Experience

- Red, sore mouth, lips, tongue or throat
- Ulcers or open sores on the mouth, gums or tongue
- Dry, sticky mouth
- Increased mucus or thicker saliva
- Difficulty swallowing or talking
- Tooth decay and gum disease

### ✓ Do

- Visit your dentist before you start treatment and get regular check-ups
- Brush your teeth (morning, night and before and after meals) with a soft bristled tooth brush
- Use a non-abrasive toothpaste and floss gently
- Clean dentures daily, remove at night and regularly during the day. Remove them if your mouth is very sore
- Eat cool or cold foods
- Eat soft or moist foods
- Drink plenty of fluids (8–12 cups a day)
- Eat little and often
- Use lip balm regularly

### ✗ Don't

- Use alcohol-based mouthwashes, and whitening toothpastes
- Eat hot, acidic, spicy, salty, sugary, crispy and dry foods
- Drink alcohol or caffeine
- Smoke

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe gels, solutions or mouthwashes
- Prescribe pain medication
- Prescribe antifungal medication

## Nausea & vomiting

### Causes

- The kidney cancer itself
- Medication

### Experience

- Feeling sick or queasy
- Throwing up/vomiting

### ✓ Do

- Eat small amounts but more often
- Aim to drink 6–8 glasses of water a day
- Eat bland, dry foods
- Try ginger – crystallized ginger, ginger tea, ginger biscuits
- Try acupuncture, acupressure and relaxation techniques
- Ask family or friends to cook for you

### ✗ Don't

- Drink alcohol, caffeine or carbonated drinks
- Eat hot, spicy, sugary, fatty, acidic foods
- Make sudden movements

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe anti-sickness medication (antiemetic)
- Modify your treatment

## Diarrhoea

### Causes

- Medications

### Experience

- Loose, watery stools three or more times a day

### ✓ Do

- Make a food diary to see if any foods in particular trigger diarrhoea
- Eat small amounts more often (5–6 times a day)
- Make sure you eat enough to maintain your weight
- Try a low fat, low fiber, low dairy diet
- Use bulking agents (eg Benefibre or Metamucil) or foods such as bananas, rice or toast to try and improve the consistency of your stools
- Clean the area around your anus with warm water or baby wipes after each bowel movement. Pat dry and do not rub
- Use anal barrier creams to sooth the area as needed

### ✗ Don't

- Drink too much fluid with meals
- Eat spicy, fatty, sugary and high fiber foods
- Eat dairy products
- Drink caffeine or alcohol
- Eat sugar free foods containing sorbitol which is a laxative
- Smoke

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe loperamide (Imodium) or diphenoxylate (Lomotil)
- Refer you to a dietician

## Constipation

### Causes

- Medications

### Experience

- Hard, dry, small stools that are difficult to pass
- Having a bowel movement less than 3 times a week

### ✓ Do

- Drink at 8–12 glasses of water a day
- Eat foods containing a high amount of fiber (e.g. wholegrains, fruit and veg) and those that are natural laxatives (e.g. prunes)
- Try adding psyllium to your diet
- Try to get some exercise every day

### ✗ Don't

- Eat highly processed food

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe a stool softener and a laxative

## Swelling (Oedema)

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### Causes

- Medication

### Experience

- Swollen, puffy arms and legs
- Tight clothes or jewellery
- Difficulty bending arms or legs
- Shiny, tight skin which indents when pressed
- Weight gain

### ✓ Do

- Put your legs up while sitting down
- Reduce the salt in your food
- Walk to help pump fluids back into your circulation

### ✗ Don't

- Stand for long periods of time
- Cross your legs

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe diuretics (water tablets)
- Recommend compression stockings

## Coughing & breathing problems

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### Causes

- Medication

### Experience

- Dry cough
- Short of breath and difficulty breathing

### ✓ Do

- **If you experience severe or sudden shortness of breath please get urgent medical attention**  
**A cough may be the first sign of a serious problem – inform your doctor straight away**
- Sit up and lean forward
- Keep your head lifted on extra pillows at night
- Keep the room cool and sit near an open window

### ✗ Don't

- Smoke
- Go out in extreme hot or cold air
- Wear tight clothes around your neck or chest
- Come into contact with fumes

### What your doctor may do

- Prescribe a cough suppressant
- Investigate for lung inflammation

## Who can I contact for more support & information?

Both Kidney Health Australia and the Cancer Council offer a free and confidential service for further support and information.

**Kidney Health Australia Cancer Support & Information Service**  
Kidney Health Australia provides support and information for kidney cancer patients, their families and carers in a variety of different ways.

Free call: **1800 454 363**  
kidneycancer@kidney.org.au  
kidneycancer.org.au  
forum.kidney.org.au



**Cancer Council** offers reliable cancer information and support to anyone affected by cancer, including patients, carers, families, friends, and healthcare professionals. They can connect you with others who have been through a similar experience and link you to practical, emotional and financial support in your area.

Free call: **13 11 20**  
cancer.org.au



For more information about kidney or urinary health, please contact our free call Kidney Health Information Service (KHIS) on 1800 454 363.

Or visit our website **kidney.org.au** to access free health literature.

This is intended as a general introduction to this topic and is not meant to substitute for your doctor's or healthcare professional's advice. All care is taken to ensure that the information is relevant to the reader and applicable to each state in Australia. It should be noted that Kidney Health Australia recognises that each person's experience is individual and that variations do occur in treatment and management due to personal circumstances, the healthcare professional and the state one lives in. Should you require further information always consult your doctor or healthcare professional.



If you have a **hearing or speech impairment**, contact the National Relay Service on **1800 555 677** or **relayservice.com.au**

For all types of services ask for 1800 454 363