Staying Cool During Chemo

Cooling caps, gloves and socks help lessen chemotherapy side effects.

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Hair loss and peripheral neuropathy can be among the most distressing side effects of cancer treatment. But keeping things cool can reduce damage to the hair follicles and nerves in the hands and feet caused by chemotherapy, researchers have found.

In July 2017, the Food and Drug Administration expanded approval of a cooling cap that helps prevent hair loss during chemotherapy. The DigniCap system was approved for women with breast cancer in 2015, but the expansion makes it an option for people with all types of solid tumors.

Available at more than 100 cancer facilities in the United States, the DigniCap system circulates a cooling liquid through a silicone cap. By lowering the scalp temperature to near freezing, it constricts blood vessels and reduces the amount of chemotherapy drugs reaching the hair follicles. A study showed that two thirds of breast cancer patients who used the DigniCap system lost less than half their hair.

A Japanese study examined a simpler technology: gloves and socks containing a frozen gel. Peripheral neuropathy is a common drug side effect that can cause pain, tingling and numbness in the hands and feet; in severe cases, it can even interfere with walking. Women who wore Elasto-Gel gloves and socks on one hand and one foot during breast cancer chemotherapy reported fewer neuropathy symptoms on that side.

Strategies like these to reduce side effects can help people with cancer remain on treatment and have a better quality of life.

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