# Paclitaxel (Taxol®)

**Pronounced:** pak-lih-TAX-uhl
**Classification:** Antimicrotubule Agent, Taxane

## About Paclitaxel

Paclitaxel is a plant alkaloid that was developed from the bark of the Pacific Yew tree. Paclitaxel works by disrupting the microtubular network essential for cell division and other normal cellular functions, eventually causing cell death.

## How to Take Paclitaxel

Paclitaxel is given by intravenous (into a vein) infusion weekly or every 3 weeks. The dosage and schedule is determined by the person's size, type of cancer, and mode of administration. You will be given several medications before the infusion to prevent an allergic reaction.

Even when carefully and correctly administered by trained personnel, this drug may cause a feeling of burning and pain. There is a risk that this drug may leak out of the vein at the injection site, resulting in tissue damage. If the area of injection becomes red, swollen, or painful at anytime during or after the injection, notify your doctor or nurse immediately. Do not apply anything to the site unless instructed by your doctor or nurse.

Paclitaxel is broken down in the body by enzymes that also break down other medications. This can cause the levels of paclitaxel in your blood to be affected by certain foods and medications. You should not eat grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice while on this medication. Be sure to tell your healthcare provider about all medications and supplements you are taking to be sure they will not interact with this medication.

## Possible Side Effects of Paclitaxel

There are a number of things you can do to manage the side effects of Paclitaxel. Talk to your doctor or nurse about these recommendations. They can help you decide what will work best for you. These are some of the most common side effects:

### Allergic Reactions

Allergic reactions are very common with paclitaxel, which is often related to the preservative it is mixed in. You will receive medications [diphenhydramine (Benadryl), corticosteroids and tagamet] prior to the infusion to decrease the risk of a reaction. Signs of a reaction can include: shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chest pain, rash, flushing or itching or a decrease in blood pressure. If you notice any changes in how you

feel during the infusion, let your nurse know immediately. The infusion will be stopped if this occurs. Depending on the severity of your reaction, you may still be able to receive paclitaxel with additional pre-medication or at a slower rate.

## Low White Blood Cell Count (Leukopenia or Neutropenia)

White blood cells (WBC) are important for fighting infection. While receiving treatment, your WBC count can drop, putting you at a higher risk of getting an infection. You should let your doctor or nurse know right away if you have a fever (temperature greater than 100.4), sore throat or cold, shortness of breath, cough, burning with urination, or a sore that doesn't heal.

**Tips to preventing infection:**

- Washing hands, both yours and your visitors, is the best way to prevent the spread of infection.
- Avoid large crowds and people who are sick (i.e.: those who have a cold, fever or cough or live with someone with these symptoms).
- When working in your yard, wear protective clothing including long pants and gloves.
- Do not handle pet waste.
- Keep all cuts or scratches clean.
- Shower or bath daily and perform frequent mouth care.
- Do not cut cuticles or ingrown nails. You may wear nail polish, but not fake nails.
- Ask your doctor or nurse before scheduling dental appointments or procedures.
- Ask your doctor or nurse before you, or someone you live with, has any vaccinations.

For more suggestions, read the Neutropenia Tip Sheet.

## Low Red Blood Cell Count (Anemia)

Your red blood cells are responsible for carrying oxygen to the tissues in your body. When the red cell count is low, you may feel tired or weak. You should let your doctor or nurse know if you experience any shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or pain in your chest. If the count gets too low, you may receive a blood transfusion. Read the anemia tip sheet for more information.

## Low Platelet Count (Thrombocytopenia)

Platelets help your blood clot, so when the count is low you are at a higher risk of bleeding. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any excess bruising or bleeding, including nose bleeds, bleeding gums or blood in your urine or stool. If the platelet count becomes too low, you may receive a transfusion of platelets.

- Do not use a razor (an electric razor is fine).
- Avoid contact sports and activities that can result in injury or bleeding.
- Do not take aspirin (salicylic acid), non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) such as Motrin®, Aleve®, Advil®, etc. as these can all increase the risk of bleeding. Unless your healthcare team tells you otherwise, you may take acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- Do not floss or use toothpicks and use a soft-bristle toothbrush to brush your teeth.

Read the thrombocytopenia tip sheet for more information.

## Nausea and/or Vomiting

Take anti-nausea medications as prescribed. If you continue to have nausea or vomiting, notify your doctor or nurse so they can help you manage this side effect. In addition, dietary changes may help. Avoid things that may worsen the symptoms, such as heavy or greasy/fatty, spicy or acidic foods (lemons, tomatoes, oranges). Try antacids, (e.g. milk of magnesia, calcium tablets such as Tums), saltines, or ginger ale to lessen symptoms. Read the Nausea & Vomiting Tip Sheet for more suggestions.

Call your doctor or nurse if you are unable to keep fluids down for more than 12 hours or if you feel lightheaded or dizzy at any time.

## Fatigue

While on cancer treatment you may need to adjust your schedule to manage fatigue. Plan times to rest during the day and conserve energy for more important activities. Exercise can help combat fatigue; a simple daily walk with a friend can help. Talk to your healthcare team and see OncoLink's section on fatigue for helpful tips on dealing with this side effect.

## Diarrhea

Your oncology team can recommend medications to relieve diarrhea. Also, try eating low-fiber, bland foods, such as white rice and boiled or baked chicken. Avoid raw fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads, cereals and seeds. Soluble fiber is found in some foods that absorbs fluid and can help relieve diarrhea. Foods high in soluble fiber include: applesauce, bananas (ripe), canned fruit, oranges, boiled potatoes, white rice and products made with white flour, oatmeal, cream of rice, cream of wheat, and farina. Drink 8-10 glasses on non-alcoholic, un-caffeinated fluid a day to prevent dehydration. Read Low Fiber Diet for Diarrhea for more tips.

## Sexual and Reproductive Changes

This drug can affect your reproductive system, resulting in the menstrual cycle or sperm production becoming irregular or stopping permanently. Women may experience menopausal effects including hot flashes and vaginal dryness. The desire for sex may decrease during treatment. Exposure of an unborn child to this medication could cause birth defects, so you should not become pregnant or father a child while on this medication. Effective birth control is necessary during treatment, even if your menstrual cycle stops or you believe your sperm is affected. You may want to consider sperm banking or egg harvesting if you may wish to have a child in the future. Discuss these options with your oncology team. See OncoLink's section on sexuality for helpful tips for dealing with these side effects.

## Mouth Ulcers (Sores)

Certain cancer treatments can cause sores or soreness in your mouth and/or throat. Notify your doctor or nurse if your mouth, tongue, inside of your cheek or throat becomes white, ulcerated or painful. Performing regular mouth care can help prevent or manage mouth sores. If mouth sores become painful, your doctor or nurse can recommend a pain reliever.

- Brush with a soft-bristle toothbrush or cotton swab twice a day.

- Avoid mouthwashes that contain alcohol. A baking soda and/or salt warm water mouth rinse (2 level teaspoons of baking soda or 1 level teaspoon salt in an eight ounce glass of warm water) is recommended 4 times daily.
- If your mouth becomes dry, eat moist foods, drink plenty of fluids (6-8 glasses), and suck on sugarless hard candy.
- Avoid smoking and chewing tobacco, drinking alcoholic beverages and citrus juices.

Read the mouth ulcer tip sheet for more information.

### Loss or Thinning of Scalp and Body Hair (Alopecia)

Your hair may become thin, brittle, or may fall out. This typically begins two to three weeks after treatment starts. This hair loss can be all body hair, including pubic, underarm, legs/arms, eyelashes, and nose hairs. The use of scarves, wigs, hats and hairpieces may help. Hair generally starts to regrow soon after treatment is completed. Remember your hair helps keep you warm in cold weather, so a hat is particularly important in cold weather or to protect you from the sun. Read more on alopecia.

### Peripheral Neuropathy (Numbness or Tingling in the Hands and/or Feet)

Peripheral neuropathy is a toxicity that affects the nerves. It causes a numbness or tingling feeling in the hands and feet, often in the pattern of a stocking or glove. This can get progressively worse with additional doses of the drug. In some people, the symptoms slowly resolve after the drug is stopped, but for some it never goes away completely. You should let your healthcare provider know if you experience numbness or tingling in the hands and feet, as they may need to change the doses of your medication. See OncoLink's section on peripheral neuropathy for tips on dealing with this side effect.

### Other Side Effects

Some less common side effects that have been reported include: muscle and/or joint aches and brittle nails.

# Cisplatin (Platinol®)

**Pronounced:** SIS-plat-in
**Classification:** Platinum Coordination Complex

### About Cisplatin

Cisplatin is a heavy metal compound that inhibits synthesis of RNA, DNA, and protein in cells. All of these compounds are vital for cells to divide and grow. By preventing them from dividing, the medication can stop the cancer from growing.

### How to Take Cisplatin

Cisplatin is given through intravenous (IV, into a vein) infusion. The dose and schedule is determined by the person's size and type of cancer. It can be given alone or with other drugs.

This medication can affect the blood levels certain anti-seizure medications. Be sure to tell your healthcare provider about all medications and supplements you take.

## Possible Side Effects

There are a number of things you can do to manage the side effects of cisplatin. Talk to your doctor or nurse about these recommendations. They can help you decide what will work best for you. These are some of the most common side effects:

### *Kidney and Liver Function Changes*

Your doctor may perform blood tests to check your liver and kidney function, as these can be affected by cisplatin. Call your doctor or nurse immediately if you have abdominal pain, if your urine becomes dark, or if your skin or the whites of your eyes become jaundiced (yellow in color).

### *Hearing Loss*

Cisplatin can cause hearing loss. Call your doctor or nurse if you have ringing in your ears or if you notice a decrease in your hearing.

### *Low White Blood Cell Count (Leukopenia or Neutropenia)*

White blood cells (WBC) are important for fighting infection. While receiving treatment, your WBC count can drop, putting you at a higher risk of getting an infection. You should let your doctor or nurse know right away if you have a fever (temperature greater than 100.4), sore throat or cold, shortness of breath, cough, burning with urination, or a sore that doesn't heal.

Tips to preventing infection:

- Washing hands, both yours and your visitors, is the best way to prevent the spread of infection.
- Avoid large crowds and people who are sick (i.e.: those who have a cold, fever or cough or live with someone with these symptoms).
- When working in your yard, wear protective clothing including long pants and gloves.
- Do not handle pet waste.
- Keep all cuts or scratches clean.
- Shower or bath daily and perform frequent mouth care.
- Do not cut cuticles or ingrown nails. You may wear nail polish, but not fake nails.
- Ask your doctor or nurse before scheduling dental appointments or procedures.
- Ask your doctor or nurse before you, or someone you live with, has any vaccinations.

### *Low Red Blood Cell Count (Anemia)*

Your red blood cells are responsible for carrying oxygen to the tissues in your body. When the red cell count is low, you may feel tired or weak. You should let your doctor or nurse know if you experience any shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or pain in your chest. If the count gets too low, you may receive a blood transfusion.

### *Low Platelet Count (Thrombocytopenia)*

Platelets help your blood clot, so when the count is low you are at a higher risk of bleeding. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any excess bruising or bleeding, including nose bleeds, bleeding gums or blood in your urine or stool. If the platelet count becomes too low, you may receive a transfusion of platelets.

- Do not use a razor (an electric razor is fine).
- Avoid contact sports and activities that can result in injury or bleeding.
- Do not take aspirin (salicylic acid), non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) such as Motrin®, Aleve®, Advil®, etc. as these can all increase the risk of bleeding. Unless your healthcare team tells you otherwise, you may take acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- Do not floss or use toothpicks and use a soft-bristle toothbrush to brush your teeth.

***Nausea and/or Vomiting***

Talk to your doctor or nurse so they can prescribe medications to help you manage nausea and vomiting. In addition, dietary changes may help. Avoid things that may worsen the symptoms, such as heavy or greasy/fatty, spicy or acidic foods (lemons, tomatoes, oranges). Try antacids, (e.g. milk of magnesia, calcium tablets such as Tums), saltines, or ginger ale to lessen symptoms.

Call your doctor or nurse if you are unable to keep fluids down for more than 12 hours or if you feel lightheaded or dizzy at any time.

***Diarrhea***

Your oncology team can recommend medications to relieve diarrhea. Also, try eating low-fiber, bland foods, such as white rice and boiled or baked chicken. Avoid raw fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads, cereals and seeds. Soluble fiber is found in some foods and absorbs fluid, which can help relieve diarrhea. Foods high in soluble fiber include: applesauce, bananas (ripe), canned fruit, orange sections, boiled potatoes, white rice, products made with white flour, oatmeal, cream of rice, cream of wheat, and farina. Drink 8-10 glasses on non-alcoholic, un-caffeinated fluid a day to prevent dehydration.

***Electrolyte Changes***

Your doctor may order blood tests to check your electrolytes. If needed, the doctor may prescribe supplements, such as magnesium or potassium.

***Peripheral Neuropathy (Numbness or Tingling in the Hands and/or Feet)***

Peripheral neuropathy is a toxicity that affects the nerves. It causes a numbness or tingling feeling in the hands and feet, often in the pattern of a stocking or glove. This can get progressively worse with additional doses of the medication. In some people, the symptoms slowly resolve after the medication is stopped, but for some it never goes away completely. You should let your healthcare provider know if you experience numbness or tingling in the hands and feet, as they may need to adjust the doses of your medication.

***Taste and Smell Changes***

You may experience a metallic taste or find that food has no taste at all. You may dislike foods or beverages that you liked before receiving cancer treatment. These symptoms can last for several months or longer after treatment ends. Avoid any food that you think smells or tastes bad. If red meat is a problem, eat chicken, turkey, eggs, dairy products and fish without a strong smell. Sometimes cold food has less of an odor. Add extra flavor to meat or fish by marinating it in sweet juices, sweet and sour sauce or dressings. Use seasonings like basil, oregano or rosemary to add flavor. Bacon, ham and onion can add flavor to vegetables. Ask your nurse about nutritional counseling services to help with food

choices.

### *Vision Changes*

This medication can cause blurred vision and a change in color perception, especially with higher doses or increased frequency of doses.  Report any vision changes to your healthcare team immediately.

### *Allergic Reactions*

In some cases, patients can have an allergic reaction to this medication. Signs of a reaction can include: shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chest pain, rash, flushing or itching or a decrease in blood pressure. If you notice any changes in how you feel during the infusion, let your nurse know immediately. The infusion will be slowed or stopped if this occurs. Depending on the severity of your reaction, you may still be able to receive the medication with a pre-medication to prevent a reaction, or if the medication is given at a slower rate.

### *Loss or Thinning of Scalp and Body Hair (Alopecia)*

Your hair may become thin, brittle, or may fall out. This typically begins two to three weeks after treatment starts. This hair loss can be all body hair, including pubic, underarm, legs/arms, eyelashes, and nose hairs. The use of scarves, wigs, hats and hairpieces may help. Hair generally starts to regrow soon after treatment is completed. Remember your hair helps keep you warm in cold weather, so a hat is particularly important in cold weather or to protect you from the sun.

### *Reproductive Concerns*

Exposure of an unborn child to this medication could cause birth defects, so you should not become pregnant or father a child while on this medication. Effective birth control is necessary during treatment Even if your menstrual cycle stops or you believe you are not producing sperm, you could still be fertile and conceive.  You should consult with your healthcare team before breastfeeding while receiving this medication.

*If you have questions or concerns about the medication that you have been prescribed, please contact your healthcare team. OncoLink is designed for educational purposes only and is not engaged in rendering medical advice or professional services. The information provided through OncoLink should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or a disease. It is not a substitute for professional care. If you have or suspect you may have a health problem, you should consult your health care provider.*

# Cetuximab (Erbitux®)

**Pronounced:** se-TUX-i-mab
**Classification:** Monoclonal Antibody

**About Cetuximab**

Cetuximab is a man-made version of a naturally occurring human/mouse antibody that inhibits the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR). The EGFR is a protein that is abnormally over-expressed in many cancers, and the inhibition of EGFR results in a decrease in tumor cell growth and decreased production of other factors responsible for metastasis (spreading of cancer).

**How to Take Cetuximab**

Cetuximab is given through intravenous (IV, into a vein) infusion. The first dose will be given over a period of about two hours. Subsequent doses will be given once a week, over about an hour. Medications are given prior to the administration of cetuximab to prevent a reaction to the infusion.

**Possible Side Effects**

There are a number of things you can do to manage the side effects of cetuximab. Talk to your doctor or nurse about these recommendations. They can help you decide what will work best for you. These are some of the most common side effects:

***Infusion Reaction***

Some patients will develop a reaction to the medication. This most commonly occurs with the first dose.  Reactions can cause chills, fever, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, hoarseness, itching, or low blood pressure. Tell your nurse right away if you experience any of these. You will be given medication prior to the infusion to help prevent this reaction. You will be monitored for at least 1 hour after the completion of your infusion.

***Nail and Skin Changes***

Cetuximab has some unique nail and skin side effects that you may develop. Patients may develop a rash. While this rash may look like acne, it is not, and should not be treated with acne medications. The rash may appear red, swollen, crusty and dry and feel sore. You may also develop very dry skin, which may crack, be itchy or become flaky or scaly. The rash my be the worst during the first few weeks of treatment, but may continue until treatment is stopped. Tips for managing your skin include:

- Use a thick, alcohol-free emollient lotion or cream on your skin at least twice a day, including right after bathing.
- Sun exposure can worsen the rash. Use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher and wear a hat and sunglasses to protect your head and face from the sun.
- Bathe in cool or lukewarm water and pat your skin dry.
- Use soaps, lotions and laundry detergents without alcohol, perfumes or dyes.
- Wear gloves to wash dishes or do housework or gardening.
- Drink plenty of water and try not to scratch or rub your skin.
- Notify your healthcare team if you develop a rash as they may have management suggestions and/or prescribe a topical medication to apply to the rash or an oral medication.

While receiving cetuximab, you may develop an inflammation of the skin around the nail bed/cuticle areas of toes or fingers, which is called paronychia. It can appear red, swollen or pus filled. Nails may develop "ridges" in them or fall off. You may also develop cuts or cracks that look like small paper cuts in the skin on your toes, fingers or knuckles. These

side effects may appear several months after starting treatment, but can last for many months after treatment stops.

- Follow the same recommendations for your skin (above).
- Don't bite your nails or cuticles or cut the cuticles.
- Keep your fingernails and toenails clean and dry.
- You may use nail polish, but do not wear fake nails.
- Notify your doctor or nurse if any nails fall off or you develop any of these side effects or other skin abnormalities.

***Hair Changes***

While receiving cetuximab, your eyelashes may grow very fast, become very long and bother your eyes. The hair on your head may become curly, fine or brittle. These changes tend to resolve once treatment is stopped.

***Diarrhea***

Your oncology team can recommend medications to relieve diarrhea. Also, try eating low-fiber, bland foods, such as white rice and boiled or baked chicken. Avoid raw fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads, cereals and seeds. Soluble fiber is found in some foods and absorbs fluid, which can help relieve diarrhea. Foods high in soluble fiber include: applesauce, bananas (ripe), canned fruit, orange sections, boiled potatoes, white rice, products made with white flour, oatmeal, cream of rice, cream of wheat, and farina. Drink 8-10 glasses on non-alcoholic, un-caffeinated fluid a day to prevent dehydration.

***Headache***

Your doctor or nurse can recommend medication and other strategies to relive pain.

***Sun Sensitivity***

This medication can make your skin more sensitive to the sun, which can result in severe sunburn or rash. Sun sensitivity can last even after chemotherapy is completed. Limit sun exposure while receiving this medication, and for two months following the last dose. Avoid the sun between 10-2pm, when it is strongest. Wear sunscreen (at least SPF 15) everyday; wear sunglasses, a hat and long sleeves/pants to protect your skin and seek out shade whenever possible.

***Fatigue***

Fatigue is very common during cancer treatment and is an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion that is not usually relieved by rest. While on cancer treatment, and for a period after, you may need to adjust your schedule to manage fatigue. Plan times to rest during the day and conserve energy for more important activities. Exercise can help combat fatigue; a simple daily walk with a friend can help. Talk to your healthcare team for helpful tips on dealing with this side effect.

***Lung Problems***

Cetuximab can cause interstitial lung disease (ILD), especially in those with pre-existing lung problems. You may have breathing tests (pulmonary function tests) performed periodically. **Call your physician right away if you have shortness of breath, cough, wheezing or difficulty breathing**.

### *Heart Problems*

Cetuximab can cause heart problems including cardiac arrest and heart attack. Patients with a prior history of coronary artery disease and/or receiving radiation therapy are at highest risk. Notify your healthcare team or go to the emergency room immediately if you experience chest pain, shortness of breath, or feel dizzy or faint.

### *Electrolyte Abnormalities*

This medication can impact the electrolyte levels in your blood; including magnesium, calcium and potassium. This can even occur after the completion of treatment. Your healthcare team will monitor your electrolyte levels during treatment, and for at least 8 weeks following the completion of treatment.

### *Reproductive Concerns*

Exposure of an unborn child to this medication could cause birth defects, so you should not become pregnant or father a child while on this medication. Effective birth control is necessary during treatment and for 6 months after treatment has stopped. Even if your menstrual cycle stops or you believe you are not producing sperm, you could still be fertile and conceive. You should not breastfeed while receiving this medication, and for 2 months after your last treatment.

*If you have questions or concerns about the medication that you have been prescribed, please contact your healthcare team. OncoLink is designed for educational purposes only and is not engaged in rendering medical advice or professional services. The information provided through OncoLink should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or a disease. It is not a substitute for professional care. If you have or suspect you may have a health problem, you should consult your health care provider.*