Paclitaxel (Taxol®)

**Pronounced:** pak-luh-TAX-uhl

**Classification:** Antimicrotubule Agent, Taxane

**About Paclitaxel (Taxol®)**

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 (IV, into a vein) infusion. The dose is based on your size. Your provider will determine how often you receive the infusion. You may 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 medication may leak out of the vein at the injection site, resulting in tissue damage that can be severe. If the area of injection becomes red, swollen, or painful at anytime during or after the injection, notify your care team immediately. Do not apply anything to the site unless instructed by your care team.

Paclitaxel can cause low or high blood pressure or a low heart rate. Your nurse will monitor your blood pressure and heart rate during the infusion.

**Possible Side Effects of Paclitaxel**

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

**Infusion Reactions**

This medication can cause a reaction that may lead to itching, facial swelling, low blood pressure, and difficulty breathing. You will receive a corticosteroid (dexamethasone), diphenhydramine, and an H2 blocker (cimetidine or famotidine) prior to the infusion to help prevent a reaction. Reactions are most common during the first week of therapy, including the evening after the infusion. Your care team will tell you what to do if this happens.

**Infection and Low White Blood Cell Count (Leukopenia or Neutropenia)**

This medication can cause life threatening infections, with or without a decrease in white blood cell counts. 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°F or 38°C), 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 oncology care team before scheduling dental appointments or procedures.
- Ask your oncology care team 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 oncology care team 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 oncology care team 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/Advil (ibuprofen), Aleve (naproxen), Celebrex (celecoxib) etc. as these can all increase the risk of bleeding. Please consult with your healthcare team regarding use of these agents and all over the counter medications/supplements while on therapy.
- Do not floss or use toothpicks and use a soft-bristle toothbrush to brush your teeth.

**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.

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

Peripheral neuropathy is a toxicity that affects the nerves. It causes numbness or a tingling feeling in the hands and/or 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 oncology care team know if you experience numbness or tingling in the hands and/or feet, as they may need to adjust the doses of your medication.

**Muscle or Joint Pain/Aches and Headache**

Your healthcare provider can recommend medications and other strategies to help relieve pain.

**Nausea and/or Vomiting**

Talk to your care team 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 care team if you are unable to keep fluids down for more than 12 hours or if you feel lightheaded or dizzy at any time.

**Diarrhea**

Diarrhea from this medication can be a serious side effect that can lead to dehydration. Notify your healthcare provider if you develop 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 of non-alcoholic, un-caffeinated fluid a day to prevent dehydration.

**Mouth Ulcers (Mucositis)**

Certain cancer treatments can cause sores or soreness in your mouth and/or throat. Notify your oncology care team 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 with warm water mouth rinse (2 level teaspoons of baking soda or 1 level teaspoon of 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.

**Heart Problems**

This medication can cause slow or abnormal heartbeats, bradycardia and changes in your blood pressure. Notify your oncology care team right away if you feel abnormal heartbeats, experience vision changes or if you feel dizzy or faint.

**Liver Toxicity**

This medication can cause liver toxicity, which your oncology care team may monitor for using blood tests called liver function tests. Notify your healthcare provider if you notice yellowing of the skin or eyes, your urine appears dark or brown, or you have pain in your abdomen, as these can be signs of liver toxicity.

**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.

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