Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Cytarabine (Conventional

This information from UpToDate® Lexidrug™ explains what you need to know about this medication, including what it's used for, how to take it, its side effects, and when to call your healthcare provider.

Brand Names: Canada

PMS-Cytarabine

Warning

- This drug may lower the ability of the bone marrow to make blood cells that the body needs. If blood cell counts get very low, this can lead to bleeding problems, infections, or anemia. If you have questions, talk with the doctor.
- This drug may also cause some other side effects. These side effects include upset stomach or throwing up, diarrhea, stomach pain, mouth sores, and liver problems. Talk with the doctor.

What is this drug used for?

- It is used to treat leukemia.
- It may be given to you for other reasons. Talk with the doctor.

What do I need to tell my doctor BEFORE I take this drug?

- If you are allergic to this drug; any part of this drug; or any other drugs, foods, or substances. Tell your doctor about the allergy and what signs you had.

This drug may interact with other drugs or health problems.

Tell your doctor and pharmacist about all of your drugs (prescription or OTC, natural products, vitamins) and health problems. You must check to make sure that it is safe for you to take this drug with all of your drugs and health problems. Do not start, stop, or change the dose of any drug without checking with your doctor.

What are some things I need to know or do while I take this drug?

- Tell all of your health care providers that you take this drug. This includes your doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and dentists.
- Have your blood work and other lab tests checked as you have been told by your doctor.
- You may have more of a chance of getting an infection. Some infections have been severe or deadly. Wash hands often. Stay away from people with infections, colds, or flu.
- Call your doctor right away if you have any signs of infection like fever, chills, flu-like signs, very bad sore throat, ear or sinus pain, cough, more sputum or change in color of sputum, pain with passing urine, mouth sores, or a wound that will not heal.
- You may bleed more easily. Be careful and avoid injury. Use a soft toothbrush and an electric razor. Rarely, some bleeding problems have been deadly.
- If you have upset stomach, throwing up, diarrhea, or decreased appetite, talk with your doctor. There may be ways to lower these side effects.
- Severe and sometimes deadly effects in body organs happened with the use of this drug at high doses in some studies. If you have questions, talk with the doctor.
- Some products have benzyl alcohol. If possible, avoid products with benzyl alcohol in newborns or infants. Serious side effects can happen in these children with some doses of benzyl alcohol, including if given with other

drugs that have benzyl alcohol. Talk with the doctor to see if this product has benzyl alcohol in it.

- Talk with your doctor before getting any vaccines. Use of some vaccines with this drug may either raise the chance of an infection or make the vaccine not work as well.
- Patients with cancer who take this drug may be at a greater risk of getting a severe health problem called tumor lysis syndrome (TLS). This may lead to death. Call your doctor right away if you have a fast or abnormal heartbeat; any passing out; trouble passing urine; muscle weakness or cramps; upset stomach, throwing up, diarrhea, or not able to eat; or feel sluggish.
- This drug may cause harm to an unborn baby. If you may become pregnant, you must use birth control while taking this drug. If you get pregnant, call your doctor right away.
- Tell your doctor if you are breast-feeding. You will need to talk about any risks to your baby.

What are some side effects that I need to call my doctor about right away?

WARNING/CAUTION: Even though it may be rare, some people may have very bad and sometimes deadly side effects when taking a drug. Tell your doctor or get medical help right away if you have any of the following signs or symptoms that may be related to a very bad side effect:

- Signs of an allergic reaction, like rash; hives; itching; red, swollen, blistered, or peeling skin with or without fever; wheezing; tightness in the chest or throat; trouble breathing, swallowing, or talking; unusual hoarseness; or swelling of the mouth, face, lips, tongue, or throat.
- Signs of bleeding like throwing up or coughing up blood; vomit that looks like coffee grounds; blood in the urine; black, red, or tarry stools; bleeding from the gums; abnormal vaginal bleeding; bruises without a cause or that get bigger; or bleeding you cannot stop.
- Signs of lung or breathing problems like shortness of breath or other trouble breathing, cough, or fever.

- Signs of liver problems like dark urine, tiredness, decreased appetite, upset stomach or stomach pain, light-colored stools, throwing up, or yellow skin or eyes.
- Signs of bowel problems like black, tarry, or bloody stools; fever; mucus in the stools; throwing up blood or throw up that looks like coffee grounds; or very bad stomach pain, constipation, or diarrhea.
- Signs of kidney problems like unable to pass urine, change in how much urine is passed, blood in the urine, or a big weight gain.
- Signs of a pancreas problem (pancreatitis) like very bad stomach pain, very bad back pain, or very bad upset stomach or throwing up.
- Signs of nervous system problems like change in mood or actions, feeling confused, fever, numbness or tingling in the hands or feet, stiff neck, bright lights bother your eyes, or very bad muscle weakness.
- Shortness of breath, a big weight gain, or swelling in the arms or legs.
- Feeling very sleepy.
- Chest pain.
- Rectal sores or pain.
- Change in eyesight, eye pain, or severe eye irritation.
- Pain and irritation where this drug goes into the body.

What are some other side effects of this drug?

All drugs may cause side effects. However, many people have no side effects or only have minor side effects. Call your doctor or get medical help if any of these side effects or any other side effects bother you or do not go away:

- Hair loss.
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, upset stomach, throwing up, or decreased appetite.
- Feeling tired or weak.
- Muscle pain.
- Bone pain.

- Mouth irritation or mouth sores.

These are not all of the side effects that may occur. If you have questions about side effects, call your doctor. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects.

You may report side effects to your national health agency.

You may report side effects to the FDA at 1-800-332-1088. You may also report side effects at https://www.fda.gov/medwatch.

How is this drug best taken?

Use this drug as ordered by your doctor. Read all information given to you. Follow all instructions closely.

- It is given as an infusion into a vein over a period of time.
- It is given as a shot into a vein, the fatty part of the skin, or into the spine.

What do I do if I miss a dose?

- Call your doctor to find out what to do.

How do I store and/or throw out this drug?

- If you need to store this drug at home, talk with your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about how to store it.

General drug facts

- If your symptoms or health problems do not get better or if they become worse, call your doctor.
- Do not share your drugs with others and do not take anyone else's drugs.
- Keep all drugs in a safe place. Keep all drugs out of the reach of children and pets.
- Throw away unused or expired drugs. Do not flush down a toilet or pour down a drain unless you are told to do so. Check with your pharmacist if you

have questions about the best way to throw out drugs. There may be drug take-back programs in your area.

- Some drugs may have another patient information leaflet. If you have any questions about this drug, please talk with your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or other health care provider.
- Some drugs may have another patient information leaflet. Check with your pharmacist. If you have any questions about this drug, please talk with your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or other health care provider.
- If you think there has been an overdose, call your poison control center or get medical care right away. Be ready to tell or show what was taken, how much, and when it happened.

Consumer Information Use and Disclaimer

This generalized information is a limited summary of diagnosis, treatment, and/or medication information. It is not meant to be comprehensive and should be used as a tool to help the user understand and/or assess potential diagnostic and treatment options. It does NOT include all information about conditions, treatments, medications, side effects, or risks that may apply to a specific patient. It is not intended to be medical advice or a substitute for the medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment of a health care provider based on the health care provider's examination and assessment of a patient's specific and unique circumstances. Patients must speak with a health care provider for complete information about their health, medical questions, and treatment options, including any risks or benefits regarding use of medications. This information does not endorse any treatments or medications as safe, effective, or approved for treating a specific patient. UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates disclaim any warranty or liability relating to this information or the use thereof. The use of this information is governed by the Terms of Use, available at https://www.wolterskluwer.com/en/know/clinical-effectiveness-terms.

Last Reviewed Date

2022-07-28

Copyright

© 2026 UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates and/or licensors. All rights reserved.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Cytarabine (Conventional - Last updated on December 12, 2022
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center