MEDICINE INFORMATION

DCarboF chemotherapy

What to expect when docetaxel, carboplatin and fluorouracil are given together, including steroid and pump instructions.

At a glance

Treatment	Docetaxel + Carboplatin + Fluorouracil (5-FU)
When it may be used	This combination has been studied before other treatment for selected head and neck cancers.
How it is given	Docetaxel, carboplatin and fluorouracil are given through a vein. Fluorouracil may run through a pump over several days.
Before you start	Tell your team about any heart or kidney problems, diabetes, mouth or swallowing problems, and numbness in your hands or feet.

What this treatment is and how it works

These three chemotherapy medicines interfere with how cells divide or copy their genetic material. Fluorouracil is also called 5-FU.

When it may be used

Docetaxel, carboplatin and fluorouracil have been studied as treatment given before the main treatment for locally advanced squamous cell cancer of the head and neck. A similar combination often called TPF uses cisplatin. Ask why carboplatin is being considered, what the combination is intended to achieve and which treatment would follow it.

Before treatment

Ask about testing for DPD deficiency, which can affect how safely the body breaks down fluorouracil.

How treatment is given

Treatment is given in cycles. Fluorouracil may run over several days through a small pump. Your team will explain how the line works, how the pump should look during treatment and who to call if it stops or leaks.

Tests and monitoring during treatment

The team checks blood counts, kidney and liver function, weight and hydration. Tell the team if eating or drinking becomes harder, even if swallowing was difficult before treatment. They may arrange dietitian support.

Side effects

Common or more frequent side effects

- **Changes in blood counts.** Treatment can lower the white cells that fight infection, the red cells that carry oxygen and the platelets that stop bleeding. You may feel tired or get breathless sooner than usual. Let the unit know about nosebleeds, new bruises or small red or purple spots. Fever or shaking chills needs a call to the urgent number even if your next blood test is already booked.
- **Sore mouth during fluorouracil.** Ulcers, painful swallowing and loose stools can sometimes start while fluorouracil is still running. Use the mouth care recommended by the unit and ask whom to call if symptoms start at home with the pump connected. Severe early symptoms warrant prompt assessment. Tell the unit when the infusion started.
- **Loose stools.** Write down how often you pass stools and whether there is any blood or fever. Let the unit know if stools are becoming more frequent or if you feel dizzy, thirsty or weak. Its advice depends on the treatment, so ask before taking a new medicine to stop diarrhoea.
- **Nail changes and hair loss.** Nails may discolour, become tender or loosen. Keep them clean and tell the team about pain, swelling or discharge, especially if your blood counts are low. Hair loss can start during treatment. Ask early about scalp cooling where appropriate, because it needs to be arranged before chemotherapy.

Other reported side effects

Docetaxel can cause fluid retention. Tell the team if shoes become tight, your weight rises quickly or your legs swell. Red, sore hands or feet can occur with fluorouracil.

Serious effects to recognise

- **Chest pain or breathlessness.** Fluorouracil can occasionally affect the heart, including during a continuous infusion. Chest pressure, sudden breathlessness or fainting needs emergency assessment. Tell the team the drug name and whether the pump is connected.

Fluorouracil can cause unusually severe early mouth sores, diarrhoea or vomiting. Tell the nurse straight away if you feel dizzy, wheezy or suddenly unwell during a drip.

When to seek urgent help

Call your cancer team urgently for fever, chills, mouth sores that stop you drinking, severe diarrhoea or vomiting, or bleeding. Get immediate medical help for chest pain during or after fluorouracil and tell staff it is in your treatment. Follow your hospital’s written temperature instructions. If you have no written threshold, call at 37.5°C (99.5°F) or above, or below 36°C (96.8°F). Call if you feel very unwell even when your temperature is normal.

Seek emergency care for severe breathing difficulty, swelling of the face or throat, chest pain, collapse or bleeding that will not stop.

Practical advice for this treatment

Plan for eating and swallowing

Head and neck cancer can already make it hard to swallow, and fluorouracil may make your mouth sore. Tell the team before treatment if you cough when drinking, avoid certain food textures or have lost weight. A dietitian and swallowing therapist can advise on safe textures and ways to maintain nutrition during treatment. Let the hospital know if mouth pain or diarrhoea stops you from drinking.

Check the pump and the medicines before the visit

If you go home with a fluorouracil pump, have the nurse show you how to carry it, which changes to report and where to come for disconnection. Find out who to call if it leaks, disconnects or seems to empty too quickly. Your nurse can tell you how to protect the line while washing or sleeping. Check the written steroid schedule for docetaxel, including when the first dose is due.

Take chest symptoms seriously

Fluorouracil can occasionally affect the heart. Chest pain, pressure or sudden breathlessness during treatment needs urgent assessment. Tell the attending team you are receiving fluorouracil and if your pump is still connected.

Medicines, interactions and vaccinations

Check before adding medicines or supplements. Tell the team if you take warfarin, or if you have recently used brivudine, a treatment for shingles used in some countries. Ask before vaccinations.

Everyday life

Make a plan for mouth care, soft foods and fluids. If you go home with a pump, keep the unit’s pump contact number separate from routine booking numbers.

Pregnancy, fertility and breastfeeding

Ask for written advice on contraception and breastfeeding for all three medicines. Talk about fertility preservation before treatment if you want children in the future.

After treatment

Ask how the team will assess response and arrange any surgery or radiotherapy. Continue to report numbness, difficulty swallowing or ongoing trouble with eating.

Frequently asked questions

Is this the same as TPF?

This regimen uses carboplatin. TPF commonly uses cisplatin. Ask which platinum medicine is written on your plan.

What if the pump alarms or leaks?

Call the number the treatment unit gave you and follow their pump instructions.

What if I miss the steroid before docetaxel?

Tell the treatment unit before your visit so they can advise you.

Who can help if I already have difficulty swallowing?

Ask the team about a dietitian or speech and swallowing specialist before treatment.

What is a DPD test for?

It helps identify people who may break down fluorouracil more slowly and need a different treatment plan.

What should I report around the drip site?

Tell the nurse about new burning, redness, swelling or leaking straight away.

Can my mouth symptoms affect treatment?

Yes. Call if sores prevent drinking or if pain, diarrhoea or vomiting becomes severe early in treatment.

When will I hear about the next phase?

Ask when the team will assess response and discuss the timing of local treatment.

Does a normal DPD test mean I cannot get serious side effects?

The test lowers the chance of giving fluorouracil to someone who cannot break it down normally. Severe side effects can still happen. Call straight away for severe mouth sores, repeated watery diarrhoea or vomiting, or difficulty drinking. Get emergency help for chest pain.

Individual medicine guides

- Docetaxel
- Carboplatin
- Fluorouracil (5-FU)

Sources and further reading

Read this guide alongside your hospital's plan. Ask your pharmacist to confirm the exact product dispensed in India and follow the instructions for that product.

Summary of Product Characteristics (SmPC) and prescribing information

- Docetaxel (Taxotere) - EU product page with SmPC
- Carboplatin infusion - UK SmPC
- Fluorouracil injection - UK SmPC

Additional sources

- Study of induction docetaxel, carboplatin and fluorouracil
- EMA recommendations on DPD testing before fluorouracil

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Review record updated: 14 November 2026 · Editorial review policy