

# Using moxa to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy

Patient Information Series PI 81



East and North Hertfordshire **NHS**  
NHS Trust



**Mount Vernon  
Cancer Centre**

## Contacts

**If at any time during your course of chemotherapy you become unwell you must contact one of the numbers below:**

Chemotherapy Suite ..... 020 3826 2236

[Mon - Fri, 8am - 5pm]

Ward 10 (mainly for men) ..... 020 3826 2022

[24 hours]

Ward 11 (mainly for women) ..... 020 3826 2040

[24 hours]

**For urgent medical advice**

**24 hour Acute Oncology Service**

**Mount Vernon Cancer Centre: 07825 028855**



**Patient information awards**

Highly commended

# Using moxa to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy

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## Contents

Contacts	2
Introduction	5
What is moxa?	5
How can having moxa help me while I am having chemotherapy?	5
How do I use moxa?	7
Getting ready to use moxa	8
How do I carry out the daily procedure?	9
Why is it important to do this daily?	10
What time of day should I apply moxa?	10
What if I miss a day?	10
Safety tips for using moxa	11
Aftercare advice	12
Keeping your Daily Moxa Diary	13
Other help and support	14
If you normally pay for NHS prescriptions	14
Consent	15
Identification	15

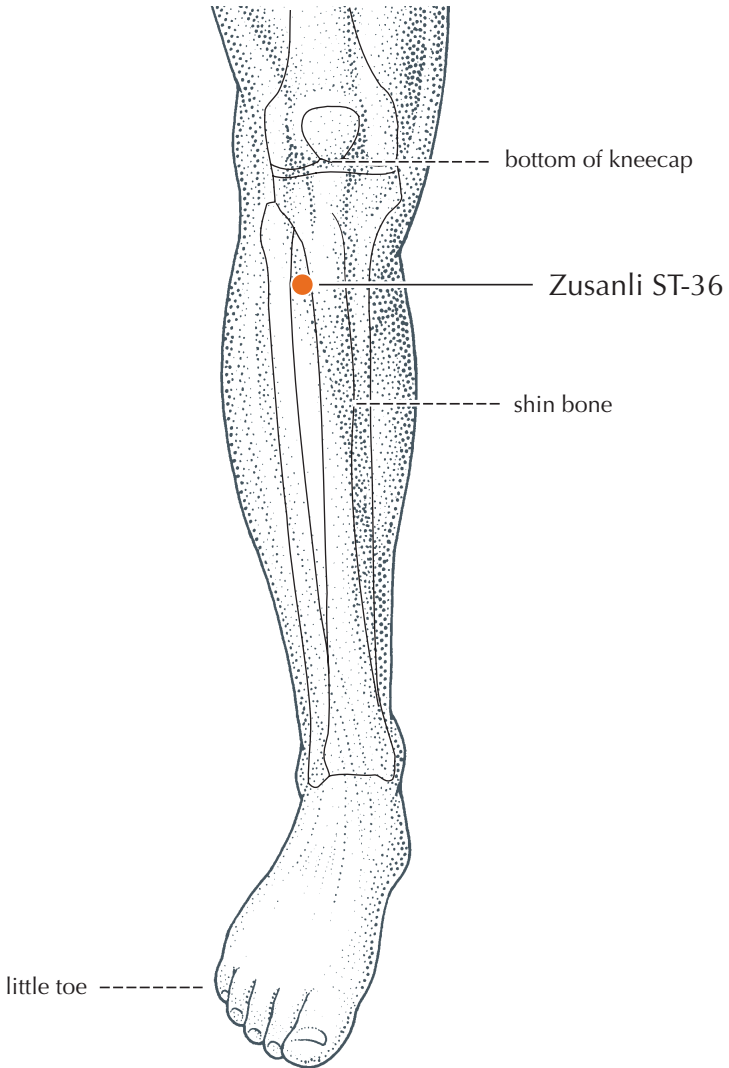


Illustration adapted from 'A Manual of Acupuncture' by Peter Deadman and Mazin Al-Khafaji, with Kevin Baker ([www.amanualofacupuncture.com](http://www.amanualofacupuncture.com)). Used with permission.

## **Introduction**

Moxa is an easy and pleasant treatment that has been used for centuries to improve health. Modern research studies and clinical practice suggest it can be helpful for people having chemotherapy for cancer.

This leaflet is written for patients who are taking part in the moxa research study. It will help to remind you how to use moxa therapy.

## **What is moxa?**

Moxa (the short word for moxibustion) is a technique used in traditional Chinese medicine. It uses heat to stimulate points on the body called acupuncture points.

The moxa stick is made from a plant called 'mugwort' and is shaped like a cigar.

## **How can having moxa help me while I am having chemotherapy?**

Chemotherapy can affect the blood cells which are made in your bone marrow causing your blood cell count to drop during your treatment. This is called bone marrow suppression.

Blood cell counts may drop too low if they do not have enough time to multiply properly and for this reason the treatment has rest periods. Chemotherapy may have to be delayed if your blood cell counts are too low to give your body extra time to recover.

The kinds of blood cells which may be affected by the chemotherapy are:

### **White blood cells**

These cells help you to fight infection. If your white blood cell count drops after chemotherapy, you are more likely to get an infection and your body may not be able to deal with it normally.

Signs of infection may be a raised temperature (of 38°C or higher), shaking chills, feeling hot and sweaty or a general feeling of being unwell.

If you have any of these signs, **contact the hospital immediately** as a blood test and/or antibiotic treatment may be needed (see the contact details on your Alert card or use the urgent medical advice line number on page 2 of this booklet). **Do not** be tempted to leave this until the next day.

If possible during your course of chemotherapy, try to avoid people with coughs, colds or obvious infections.

### **Platelets**

Platelets help your blood to clot. If your platelet count falls, you may notice that you bruise more easily than usual. Small red-purple spots may appear under the skin, or your nose or gums may bleed. Please let your team know if you experience these symptoms (see Contacts on page 2 of this booklet).

### **Red blood cells**

These cells carry oxygen to all parts of your body. If they are affected by the drugs, you may feel tired and look pale or you may be short of breath. Please let your team know using the contact numbers on page 2 of this booklet. Sometimes this may mean you will need to have a blood transfusion.

Using moxa everyday may help you by:

- aiding your body to make enough blood cells to reduce the chance of those conditions
- reduce other side effects such as fatigue, anxiety, feeling low, nausea and vomiting

## How do I use moxa?

Moxa is used over an acupuncture point on each leg, just below the knee, as shown on page 4. You will need to find these points. Make sure you have marker pen ready.

To find this point you will need to find your kneecap and shinbone. Your kneecap is a bone at the top of your knee. It is about two inches in diameter. Your shin bone is the long bone on the front of your leg below your knee.

To find the point on your right leg, use your right hand:

**Step 1:** Sit with your feet on the floor.

**Step 2:** Your kneecap is the area on your knee that sticks out. Feel down this to the place where it ends. This is the bottom of the kneecap and below it there is a slight indentation.

**Step 3:** Hold your four fingers firmly together and place your index finger horizontally across the bottom of your kneecap (Figure 1).

**Step 4:** Use your marker pen to make a small horizontal mark on your leg long the edge of where your little finger now sits.



Figure 1

**Step 5:** Use your index finger to run down the shinbone to the level you have just marked. Roll this finger to the right and use your marker pen to make a vertical line on your leg down the outside of your finger (Figure 2).



Figure 2

**Step 6:** The point for your moxa treatment is where these two lines meet. Mark this point with your marker pen (Figure 3).

Repeat these steps to find the acupuncture point on your left leg, rolling your left finger to the left in step 5.

Remember that the acupuncture point on each leg is on the same side as your little toe, as shown on page 4.



Figure 3

## Getting ready to use moxa

Before using moxa you will need to have the following items to hand:

- moxa stick
- moxa extinguisher
- moxa lighter
- timer

Light one end of the moxa stick with the lighter. It may take about a minute to build up a good heat. When the stick is correctly lit, you will be able to hold the lit end about two to three centimetres from your hand. You will feel a pleasant radiating warmth.

**Never allow there to be direct contact between your skin and the lit end of the moxa stick.**



## How do I carry out the daily procedure?

Your moxa treatment should take less than 10 minutes a day.

Find a space where you can be comfortable and will not be disturbed.

Locate the acupuncture point on each leg. You can mark these with your pen. The marks may remain visible for several days. You can use the pen at intervals to keep the marks visible.

Light the moxa stick. Test it, and when it is warm enough, set your timer for 3 minutes, then:

- hold the moxa stick over the mark on one leg – about two to three centimetres away from your skin
- apply for 3 minutes (use your timer for this)
- if it feels too hot, move the moxa stick further from your skin
- if it feels too cool, move it closer to the skin. You may wish to check that the moxa stick is giving off enough heat. If not, apply the lighter to it for about a minute

From time to time, brush off any ash that forms on the end of the stick. Do this by gently brushing the tip against the moxa extinguisher. This helps the moxa stick stay hot. The ash will drop into the bowl shaped cup of the extinguisher.

The sensation should always be one of a **pleasant**, radiating warmth.

After 3 minutes, the skin should redden slightly. This redness will go away shortly after the treatment has finished. Do not increase the time to more than 3 minutes.

Repeat this procedure on the other leg.

At the end of the session, place the lit end of the moxa stick in the central hole of the extinguisher. **Make sure the moxa is extinguished.**

You can re-light the moxa stick for repeated treatments. Over time, as it burns down, it will become uncomfortable to hold. When this happens, use a new moxa stick.

Please bring your burnt down sticks back to the Health Improvement Practitioner at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre for disposal.

### **Why is it important to do this daily?**

The effect of moxa is thought to peak at around six hours after treatment. Its effect starts to wear off after 20 hours. It is important to apply it each day to keep the effect as continuous as possible.

### **What time of day should I apply moxa?**

You can apply moxa at any time of the day. Find a time that suits you, and try to get into a routine. This will make it easier for you to make sure you apply it every day.

### **What if I miss a day?**

If you miss a day, make sure to carry out the procedure as early the next day as possible.

## Safety tips for using moxa

Please follow these safety tips when you use moxa:

- there should never be any direct contact with the skin
- always make sure to use moxa over bare skin, not over tights or clothing
- always make sure skin is clean and oils and moisturisers have not been applied
- avoid dropping moxa sticks, or tapping them when removing the ash. This can create small hairline cracks, creating a risk for a piece to fall off and burn carpet, furnishings or yourself
- never touch the lighted end of a moxa stick even if it no longer appears to be glowing
- use the extinguisher to extinguish the moxa. Do not try to extinguish it using water
- keep the moxa and extinguisher out of the reach of children and animals

Avoid using moxa at these times:

- before or after a hot bath
- with extreme physical fatigue or emotional distress
- if too hungry or too full
- after alcohol consumption or drug use (such as very strong painkillers, or recreational drugs that may interfere with your perception)

## Aftercare advice

It is unusual for burns to occur. However, it is important to know how to deal with them.

**1.** In rare cases, some people find that the area where moxa was applied has become red and a little sore after treatment. This may come as a surprise, especially if they felt no discomfort during the treatment.

If this is the case with you after any application, you may be at risk of developing a small burn. Please follow these simple steps to prevent injury to your skin:

- apply cold wet compresses to the area. Continue this for 10-20 minutes. This will relieve any soreness and stop a burn developing
- while you cool the affected area, wrap up and make sure that you keep warm so that you remain comfortable
- cover the burn with clean, non-fluffy material to protect it from infection. Use a sterile dressing such as Melolin™, or cover the wound with ordinary kitchen film

**2.** If the area is burned more deeply, blistered or pale and blackened, you will need to seek some medical help after following these steps:

- start cooling the burn by applying compresses or holding under running water for at least 10 minutes
- cover the burn as detailed above
- seek medical advice immediately

### **For ALL burns:**

- do not use lotions, ointments, creams or essential oils
- do not use adhesive dressings
- do not break blisters

**IMPORTANT:** Any burn larger than a postage stamp requires medical attention. All deep burns of any size will need urgent hospital treatment.

## **Keeping your Daily Moxa Diary**

Make sure to keep an accurate record in your Daily Moxa Diary. This includes marking any days that you miss. Keeping an accurate record will help us assess the effects of using moxa.

**Please remember to bring your Daily Moxa Diary and the used moxa sticks to your chemotherapy appointments.**

The Health Improvement Practitioner will meet you and collect them. She will give you the next diary to complete, and will give you more moxa sticks if you need them.

### **Additional support**

We have also made a short video demonstrating how to use moxa.

This can be viewed at the following url:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKtTvHPGzyY&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKtTvHPGzyY&feature=youtu.be)

A link to this can be found on the Research pages of the LJMC website: at [www.ljmc.org](http://www.ljmc.org)

OR please ask for a DVD or usb memory stick

### **If you have any questions, please contact:**

Clare Scarlett, Health Improvement Practitioner,  
Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre: tel: 020 3826 2561

## Other help and support

The Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC) offers information and support to patients and their families and is located next to Chemotherapy Suite by Gate 3. The staff at the LJMC work as part of the overall team caring for you.

People who have cancer often say that during their illness they experience a range of emotions. Many find it to be a stressful, anxious and confusing time. Please feel free to drop in before, during and after any of your visits to Mount Vernon Cancer Centre to find out more about the LJMC services that you may find helpful.

The volunteers and healthcare professionals at the LJMC provide help, support and information in a relaxed setting to help patients cope with cancer and its treatment.

LJMC services include a range of complementary therapies, counselling, relaxation sessions and financial advice. You can drop in without an appointment or call the LJMC helpline on 020 3826 2555. More information is on the back of this leaflet.

### **If you normally pay for NHS prescriptions**

People undergoing treatment for cancer do not have to pay NHS prescription charges if they have a valid medical exemption certificate. To get an exemption certificate, ask your GP for an application form.

## **Consent**

It is a legal requirement to have a signed consent form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

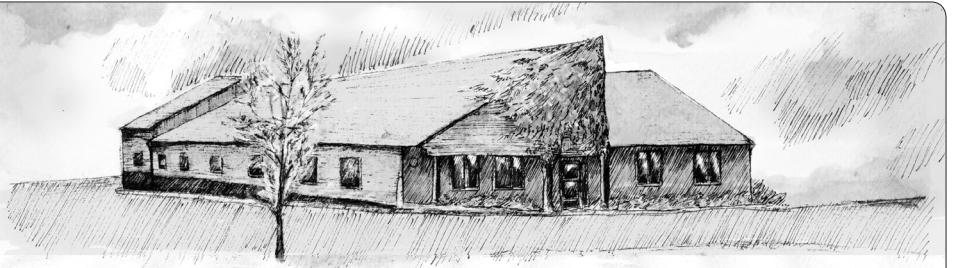
If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

## **Identification**

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment records every time you attend.

This publication has been produced by the Information team at the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre. Contributors include professionals, patients and carers from Mount Vernon Cancer Centre who have expertise and experience in the topics covered by this publication. All our publications are reviewed and updated regularly. If you would like any details of the references used to write this information please contact the

**Lynda Jackson**   
Macmillan Centre



# Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre

*... supporting people affected by cancer...*

- ① Drop-in centre for support and information
- ① Telephone helpline
- ① Complementary therapies\*
- ① Counselling\*
- ① Benefits advice\*
- ① Relaxation classes
- ① Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops
- ① The Way Ahead headwear workshops
- ① Self-help courses

The **Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre** is situated between the Cancer Centre and Gate 3 (White Hill)

Please drop in or call to find out how we may be able to help you

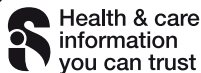
Opening hours: **Monday–Friday: 9.30am–4.30pm**

Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2RN

Telephone Helpline: **020 3826 2555**

Website: **[www.ljmc.org](http://www.ljmc.org)**

\* Service only available to NHS patients under the care of an oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre



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