

# Chemotherapy Induced Nausea and Vomiting in Children: A Literature Review and Recommendation for Antiemetic Prophylaxis in Resource Limited Countries

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## ABSTRACT

Chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting (CINV) are the most common side effects that impacts quality of life in children receiving cancer treatment. Inadequately controlled CINV impairs functional activity increases the health-care utilization and compromises treatment adherence. The availability of new antiemetic agents results in substantially improvement of emetic control; however, in real-world practice, many developing countries have limited access to newly-developed antiemetic agents. This is a major obstacle in achieving adequate CINV control. Recent studies have recommended the “triple therapy” regimen (a 5-HT<sub>3</sub> antagonist, dexamethasone, and a neurokinin-1 antagonist), as the backbone for antiemetic prophylaxis. Olanzapine, an atypical antipsychotic drug that improves CINV control in adult cancer patients. Together with “triple therapy” olanzapine is now recommended as the first line CINV prophylaxis in adults receiving highly emetogenic chemotherapy.

Herein, we reviewed the recent published guidelines for the prevention and treatment of CINV in children. Furthermore, due to limited drug accessibility to neurokinin-1 antagonists, we proposed an institutional CINV guideline to replace the neurokinin-1 antagonist with olanzapine, which might be more reasonable in terms of economic constraints in resource limited countries.

**Keywords:** antiemetic agents; chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting; childhood cancer; guidelines

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## INTRODUCTION

Chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting (CINV) are the most common side effects among children with cancer, who receive chemotherapy. It often causes an unpleasant experience, affects the patient's quality of life as well as their treatment adherence.

Recently, in 2017, the Pediatric Oncology Group of Ontario (POGO) published guidelines for the emetogenic classification of antineoplastic agents, prevention, and treatment of breakthrough and refractory CINV in children. Additionally, the "Antiemetics: ASCO Update", developed by the American Society of Clinical Oncology, has been endorsed by the Children's Oncology group (COG): December 2020. These guidelines comprised of series of evidence-based guidelines for children with cancer.<sup>1,2</sup> Therefore, as detailed below, we reviewed the published article, and the latest version of available guidelines for the prevention and treatment of chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting in children.

## DEFINITIONS

Nausea is defined as a subjective experience of impending emesis. Vomiting is defined as expulsion of stomach contents through the mouth.<sup>3</sup>

1. Acute CINV is defined as nausea/vomiting, presumed to be attributable to chemotherapy that occurs within the first 24 hours (hr) after completion of chemotherapy.<sup>3,4</sup>

2. Delayed CINV is defined as nausea/vomiting, presumed to be attributable to chemotherapy that occurs after the first 24 hr. Delayed CINV can last for 3–5 days after completing chemotherapy. It often occurs in cases of poor control of acute CINV, or specific chemotherapeutic agents; such as cisplatin. It is recommended to administer antiemetic drugs for at least 24–48 hr for those who receive platinum-based chemotherapy, so as to prevent delayed CINV.<sup>3,4</sup>

3. Anticipatory CINV is defined as nausea/vomiting that occurs before receiving chemotherapy. It is usually caused by patient anxiety, and bad experiences from previous chemotherapy blocks.<sup>5</sup>

4. Breakthrough CINV is defined as nausea/vomiting, presumed to be attributable to chemotherapy, and with no other pathologic cause that occurs; despite CINV prophylaxis.<sup>6</sup>

5. Refractory CINV is defined as nausea/vomiting, presumed to be attributable to chemotherapy, and with no other pathologic cause that occurs; despite CINV prophylaxis in patients who have experienced breakthrough CINV in a previous chemotherapy block.<sup>6</sup>

## PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF CINV

The pathophysiology of CINV involves complex multifactorial mechanisms between several neurotransmitters and receptors in the central nervous system, and gastrointestinal tract. Current studies show the mechanism is composed of two different mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

1. Peripheral pathway originates in the gastrointestinal tract, which is activated during the first 24 hr of chemotherapy administration. Therefore, it is mainly responsible for acute CINV. This process is mainly initiated by serotonin release from enterochromaffin cells located in intestinal mucosa, serotonin. These then bind to the 5-hydroxytryptamine type 3 receptors (5-HT<sub>3</sub>) on vagal afferent nerves, and send the signal through the chemotherapy trigger zone (CTZ) in the area of the postrema to the vomiting center within the medulla.

2. Central pathway occurs primarily in the brain, and it is mainly responsible for delayed CINV; although the induction of acute emesis can also occur through this pathway. Chemotherapy stimulates substance P release from both the peripheral and central nervous systems, but it mostly binds to neurokinin 1 (NK1) receptors in the neu-

ral networks of the central nervous system. This results in the direct activation of both CTZ and the vomiting center.

## CLASSIFICATION OF CHEMOTHERAPY EMETOGENICITY

The classification of chemotherapy emetogenicity is very important for the appropriate selection of antiemetic prophylaxis. Especially, in chemotherapy-naïve pediatric patients; wherein, the emetogenicity of chemotherapy remains the most important determinant of CINV in providing suitable CINV prophylaxis regimens. Emetogenicity classifications are based on the incidence of vomiting in the absence of antiemetic prophylaxis in chemotherapy naïve patients. Chemotherapy is classified into 4 categories<sup>8</sup> (Table 1).

1. Minimal emetogenic chemotherapy: the incidence of vomiting in the absence of prophylaxis less than 10%, usually not requiring antiemetic prophylaxis. Most clinical practice guidelines recommend not administering CINV prophylaxis for this group.

2. Low emetogenic chemotherapy: the incidence of vomiting in the absence of prophylaxis at approximately 10–30%, COG supportive care-endorsed guidelines recommend a single daily dose of 5-HT<sub>3</sub> antagonist; such as, ondansetron or granisetron as the following:

- Ondansetron 10 mg/m<sup>2</sup>/dose (0.3 mg/kg/dose; maximum 16 mg/dose) intravenously, as a single daily dose.
- Granisetron 40 mcg/kg/dose intravenously, as a single daily dose.

3. Moderately emetogenic chemotherapy (MEC): incidence of vomiting in the absence of CINV prophylaxis of about 30–90%, COG supportive care endorsed guidelines recommend the combination of 2 drugs, comprising of: 5-HT<sub>3</sub> antagonists (granisetron, ondansetron, or palonosetron), plus dexamethasone or 5-HT<sub>3</sub> antagonist plus aprepitant, for children who cannot tolerate dexamethasone.

4. Highly emetogenic chemotherapy (HEC): incidence of CINV is usually more than 90%, and multiple-agent

**Table 1** Classification of chemotherapy emetogenicity<sup>8</sup>

Groups	Minimal emetogenic	Low emetogenic	Moderately emetogenic	Highly emetogenic
Emetogenic risk	< 10%	10 – 30%	> 30 – 90%	> 90%
Example	Asparaginase Bleomycin Bevacizumab Fludarabine Hydroxyurea Imatinib / Dasatinib Mercaptopurine MTX (oral/IT) Rituximab Sorafenib Thioguanine Vinblastine Vincristine Vinorelbine	Cytarabine < 200 mg/m <sup>2</sup> Docetaxel Etoposide 5-FU Gemcitabine MTX > 50 to < 250 mg/m <sup>2</sup> Mitoxantrone Paclitaxel Temozolomide Thiotepa < 300 mg/m <sup>2</sup> Topotecan	Arsenic trioxide CTX < 1 g/m <sup>2</sup> Cytarabine > 200 to < 3 g/m <sup>2</sup> Daunorubicin Doxorubicin Idarubicin Ifosfamide Irinotecan MTX > 250 mg to < 12 g/m <sup>2</sup> Oxaliplatin Triple IT*	Busulfan CTX ≥ 1 g/m <sup>2</sup> Cytarabine ≥ 3 g/m <sup>2</sup> Carboplatin Cisplatin Dactinomycin Dacarbazine Melphalan MTX ≥ 12 g/m <sup>2</sup> Thiotepa ≥ 300 mg/m <sup>2</sup> Multiple agent - CTX + anthracyclin - CTX + Etoposide - Etoposide+ Ifosfamide

5-FU = Fluorouracil; CTX = Cyclophosphamide; IT = intrathecal; MTX = Methotrexate

regimens that are commonly used in Thai-pediatric oncology group (Thai-POG) usually fall into this category. For example: Bleomycin-Etoposide-Cisplatin (BEP) regimen or Infosfamid-Carboplatin-Etoposide (ICE) regimen. Hence, COG & POGO recommends a triple-agents regimen, comprising of: 5-HT3 antagonists (granisetron, ondansetron, or palonosetron), plus dexamethasone and aprepitant. However, aprepitant should be omitted in children younger than 6 months.<sup>9</sup>

## ANTIEMETIC AGENTS

Antiemetic agents to prevent CINV consist of a large variety and different drug classes. These agents can be classified as agents with high therapeutic index or agents with high therapeutic index.<sup>3</sup>

### Agents with a high therapeutic index

#### 5-HT3 antagonists

Currently, five 5-HT3 antagonists are available: ondansetron, granisetron, dolasetron, tropisetron, and palonosetron<sup>8</sup>, and these drugs have remained the mainstay of treatment for CINV for many years. Of these, the three commonly used in pediatric populations are: ondansetron, granisetron and palonosetron. For children receiving highly emetogenic chemotherapy, POGO recommends a triple antiemetic prophylaxis; including, 5-HT3 antagonists (ondansetron, granisetron or palonosetron), dexamethasone and aprepitant ( $\geq 6$  months of age and receiving chemotherapy, which are not known to interact with aprepitant), or a two drug combination in children age  $< 6$  months, or receiving chemotherapy known to interact with aprepitant.<sup>9,10</sup> At the approved dosage, the single daily dose schedule has similar efficacy to a multiple dose schedule. However, these agents have limited efficacy to prevent delayed CINV; especially in patients receiving cisplatin. Of these palonosetron, a second generation 5-HT3 antagonist, is a highly effective agent in children. Additionally, it has a prolonged half-life (approximately 40

hr) and greater binding affinity for the 5-HT3 receptor. Furthermore, it has demonstrated its superiority to first generation 5-HT3 antagonists; including, ondansetron and granisetron, in the prevention of CINV.<sup>11,12</sup> Although, adverse effects include mild headaches, transient elevation of hepatic enzymes and constipation, they are usually limited and have limited toxicity at regular doses.<sup>12</sup>

#### Corticosteroids

Corticosteroids were first shown to be effective antiemetic drugs to prevent both acute and delayed CINV in children over the last three decades<sup>2</sup>; however, they are more beneficial when combined with other antiemetic agents. Current clinical practice guidelines for CINV prevention strongly recommend that children who received HEC should also receive dexamethasone in combination with 5-HT3 antagonist and aprepitant. However, when corticosteroid is given with a moderate cytochrome P-450 3A4 inhibitor aprepitant, doses should be reduced by approximately 50%.<sup>10</sup>

Dexamethasone is the corticosteroid that has most frequently been studied, and 5-HT3 antagonists with dexamethasone added are effective in patients receiving HEC.<sup>13</sup> Scaled pediatric dexamethasone doses, based on the recommended dose for adults (20 mg/day for HEC and 8 mg/day for MEC), suggested dexamethasone dosing for CINV prevention in the absence of NK-1 receptor antagonist as follows<sup>14</sup>

HEC age  $\leq 1$  yr: 0.3 mg/kg and age  $> 1$  yr: 12 mg/m<sup>2</sup>

MEC age  $\leq 1$  yr: 0.11 mg/kg and age  $> 1$  yr: 4.6 mg/m<sup>2</sup>

The most common adverse effects are steroid induced acne, increased appetite, insomnia and gastrointestinal symptoms.<sup>9</sup>

#### Neurokinin-1-receptor antagonists

The neurokinin-1-receptor antagonists represent the latest class of antiemetic agents that are highly

effective for CINV prevention. Aprepitant (Emend<sup>®</sup>, Merck) was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2003 in an oral formulation. Aprepitant is a moderate inhibitor of the cytochrome P-450 3A4 (CY-P3A4) pathway. Corticosteroids are also metabolized by this pathway; therefore, when aprepitant was given in combination with dexamethasone, the plasma concentration of dexamethasone would be increased. The use of a NK-1 receptor antagonist was previously restricted to children 12 years and older, and only a 5-HT3 antagonist and dexamethasone was recommended as prophylaxis; even for those who were receiving HEC.<sup>5</sup> Not until recently, has the data been expanded for the use of aprepitant in children receiving HEC from 6 months of age,<sup>14</sup> as per the current updated recommendations.<sup>9,10</sup> The most common side effects are fatigue, hiccups, and dyspepsia.<sup>15</sup>

#### Agents with a low therapeutic index

##### Metoclopramide

The efficacy of metoclopramide improves with increasing doses, as it has the capacity to inhibit 5-HT3 receptors at higher blood levels. The recommend dose is 1–2 mg/kg (maximum 25 mg) before chemotherapy, and then every 6 hr after. Current guidelines recommend the use of metoclopramide as an alternative additive drug to treat breakthrough, or refractory CINV in children older than 1 year who cannot receive olanzapine.<sup>6,16</sup>

The most common, reported adverse effects, associated with the use of metoclopramide in children, are extrapyramidal side effects (9%), diarrhea (6%) and sedation (6%); all of which are reversible. Life threatening adverse events have been rarely associated with this drug when used in children. To prevent extrapyramidal side effects, diphenhydramine should be prescribed, and the use of metoclopramide in children < 5 years should be limited to 5 days.<sup>17</sup>

##### Olanzapine

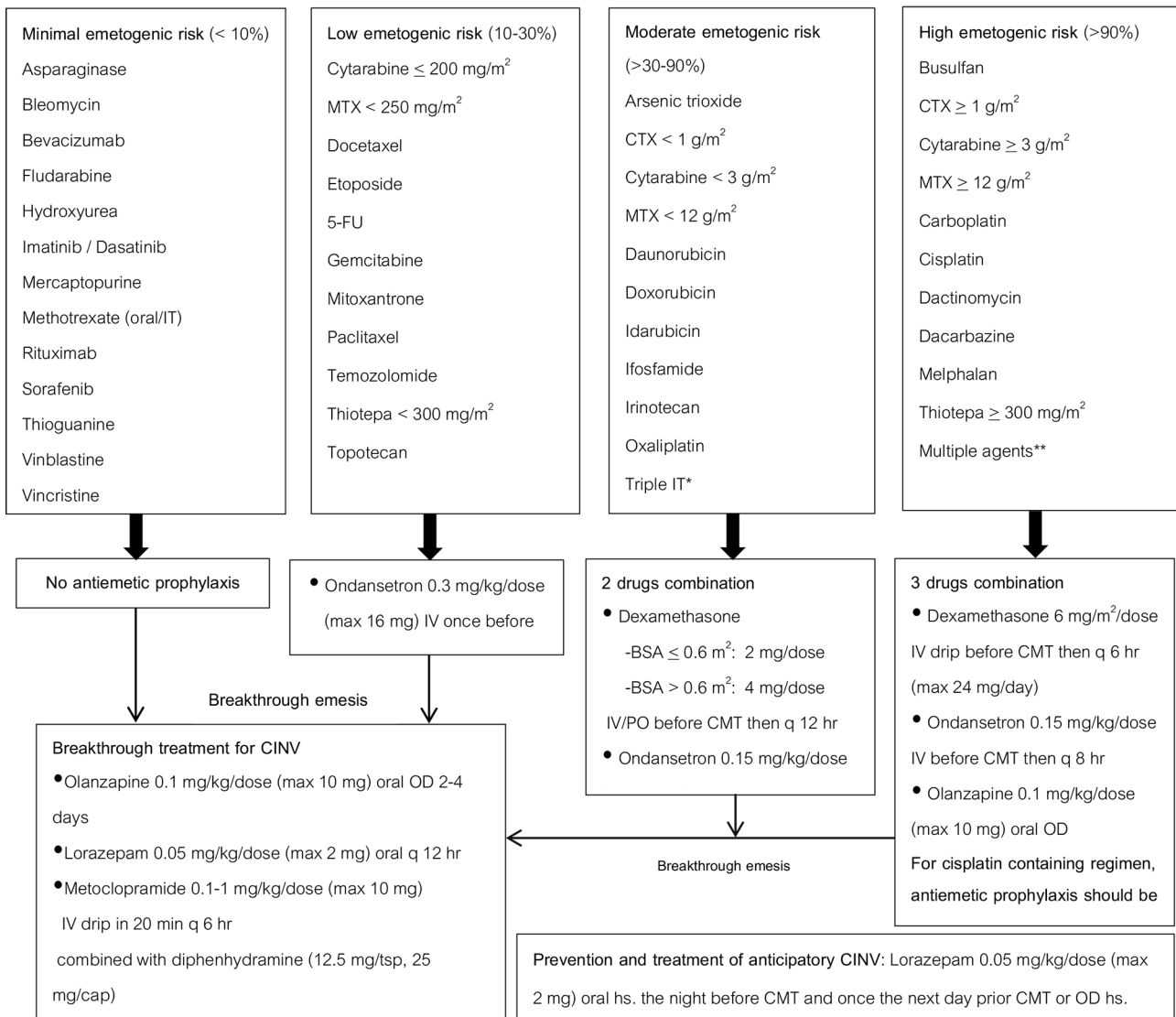
Olanzapine is approved by the FDA as an anti-psychotic agent. It blocks multiple neurotransmitter receptors; including, dopaminergic (D<sub>1</sub>–D<sub>4</sub> receptors; 5-HT<sub>2a</sub>, 5-HT<sub>2c</sub>, 5-HT<sub>3</sub> and 5-HT<sub>6</sub> serotonergic receptors; alpha-1 adrenergic, muscarinic and histaminic receptors. A large, randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled, phase 3 trial in adults receiving HEC showed that combining olanzapine with dexamethasone and palonosetron was very effective at controlling both acute (complete response 97%) and delayed emesis (complete response 97%); and at least as effective as aprepitant, dexamethasone and palonosetron to prevent CINV.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, olanzapine also has superior efficacy for controlling nausea when compared to NK1-receptor antagonists.<sup>19</sup>

For breakthrough CINV, olanzapine was superior to metoclopramide to treat breakthrough emesis. Therefore, olanzapine is currently recommended for the treatment of breakthrough and refractory CINV in children.<sup>6</sup> Olanzapine significantly improved CINV control rates in children, when administered along with ondansetron, dexamethasone and aprepitant and was well tolerated.<sup>20</sup> The most common adverse effects are somnolence, drowsiness and fatigue.<sup>21</sup>

Olanzapine at a dose of 5 mg/day has been shown to be effective in adult patients with a lower incidence of somnolence.<sup>22</sup> Based on 5 mg/day in adult dosing, recent studies recommended an initial pediatric dose of 0.1 mg/kg of olanzapine (max 10 mg/day).<sup>22,23</sup>

##### Benzodiazepine

Benzodiazepines have a modest antiemetic effect, but its antianxiety properties can be useful in some situations; especially for anticipatory CINV prevention.<sup>3</sup> The recommended dose for lorazepam is 0.04–0.08 mg/kg/dose (max 2 mg), once at bedtime the night before chemotherapy, and once the next day prior to chemotherapy administration.<sup>5</sup> The common adverse effects are somnolence and drowsiness.



5-FU = 5-Fluorouracil; BSA = body surface area; CMT = chemotherapy; CINV = chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting; CTX = cyclophosphamide; hs = hora somni (at bedtime); IT = intrathecal; IV = intravenous; MTX = methotrexate; OD = once a day; tsp = teaspoon

\*Triple IT = triple intrathecal chemotherapy is the combination of 3 drugs (MTX = hydrocortisone and cytarabine) given via intrathecal route.

\*\*Multiple agents: combination of chemotherapy that resulting increased emetogenic risk eg. CTX + anthracyclin; CTX + etoposide = etoposide + ifosfamide.

Figure 1 Recommendation for antiemetic prophylaxis for children receiving antineoplastic agents according to emetogenic risks

## RECOMMENDATION FOR ANTIEMETIC PROPHYLAXIS FOR CHILDREN IN RESOURCE LIMITED COUNTRIES

In developing countries, antiemetic accessibility is one of important obstacles to achieve adequate CINV control. At present, the current antiemetic drugs recommended for children; such as, aprepitant, palonosetron or granisetron are not included in the national list of essential drugs (NLED) of Thailand.<sup>24</sup> The current available drugs according to NLED include: dexamethasone, ondansetron, metoclopramide, olanzapine and lorazepam. Therefore, to access NK1 receptor antagonist, patients have to pay out-of-pocket expenses; resulting in the limited use of aprepitant in Thailand.<sup>24</sup>

Recently, the American Society of Clinical Oncology proposed a 4-drug combination of an NK1 receptor antagonist, a serotonin (5-HT<sub>3</sub>) receptor antagonist, dexamethasone and olanzapine for adults receiving HEC.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, olanzapine might be a good and potential substantial agent to replace aprepitant in cases of drug accessibility being not possible, when receiving antineoplastic agents are known to interact with aprepitant or during aprepitant shortages in some countries. Here we proposed the adopted recommendation for antiemetic prophylaxis in resource limited countries.

Recommended antiemetic prophylaxis for children receiving HEC, when the access of NK1 receptor antagonist and palonosetron are possible. We suggest a 3-drug combination as the standard guideline.

Aprepitant 3 mg/kg/day day 1 (maximum 125 mg)  
2 mg/kg/day day 2–3 (maximum 80 mg)

Palonosetron 20 mcg/kg IV once pre chemotherapy  
(maximum 1.5 mg)

Dexamethasone 6 mg/m<sup>2</sup>/dose IV q 6 hr.

Recommended antiemetic prophylaxis for children receiving HEC, when the access of antiemetic agents outside NLED are not feasible. We recommend the

usage of ondansetron instead of palonosetron, and to offer olanzapine instead of aprepitant. For other emetogenic risks, the recommendation would follow current published clinical practice guidelines.<sup>1,4-6</sup> (Figure 1)

## CONCLUSION

CINV is the most common unwanted symptom for children with cancer who receive chemotherapy. Better understanding of the mechanism and current antiemetic prophylaxis available is important for improving quality of life, and treatment adherence. Although, drug accessibility remains the obstacle for CINV control in many parts of the world, the current, available data has shown a potential substitution of these unavailable drugs. Further prospective studies are needed to provide more data to support our recommendations.

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