

# MANAGING CHEMOTHERAPY SIDE EFFECTS

## INFECTION PREVENTION

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**These are general guidelines only and are not intended to replace talking with your health care providers. Be sure to tell your doctor or nurse about any side effects that you notice.**

### **What are white blood cells?**

There are three main types of cells in your blood: white cells, red cells and platelets. White blood cells (WBC) help your body fight infections. When the count or number of white blood cells is low, it is easier for you to get an infection. Having a low white blood cell count is also called neutropenia (new-tro-pee-nee-ah)

### **How will a low white blood cells count affect me?**

When your white blood cells are low, you are not able to fight infections as well. Often the first symptom of an infection is a rise in temperature. It is very important that you take your temperature every day if your white blood cell count is low. If you have a temperature above 38°C or 100°F, you should go to the nearest emergency room. Tell the doctor and nurses that you have had chemotherapy and take a list of your medications with you.

Infections can make you very sick. Having a low white blood cell count may mean that you to get a smaller dose of chemotherapy or even delay your next treatment.

### **Take these steps to lower your chances of getting an infection:**

#### **Wash your hands well.**

- Always wash your hands:
  - Before you cook or eat
  - After you use the bathroom
  - After being in a public place
- Wash your hands well with soap and water. Have people around you wash their hands well, too
- Use hand sanitizer when you can't find soap and water

### **Stay extra clean**

- Wash your hands before eating and after using the toilet
- Keep your hands out of your mouth
- Brush your teeth after meals and before you go to bed. Use a very soft toothbrush
- Shower or bathe daily, if you are able
- Clean scrapes or cuts right away with soap and warm water
- If you have a catheter, keep the area around it clean and dry. Ask your nurse how to take care of this area

### **Try to stay away from germs**

- Stay away from people who are sick or have a cold. Try to stay away from big crowds if you can, especially when your white blood cells are at the lowest, which is usually 10 -14 days after your chemotherapy
- Wash raw fruit and vegetables
- Wash your hands carefully after you handle raw meat. Cook meat well before eating it
- It is recommended that you stay away from people who have just been vaccinated with chicken pox (Varicella), shingles (Varicella zoster) polio, measles/ mumps/rubella (MMR) or intranasal FluMist vaccines for at least 48 hours
- Do not share drinking glasses or eating utensils
- Do not touch animal 'droppings', litter boxes or birdcages. Use rubber gloves if you must clean up after an animal
- Do not work in the garden, unless you are wearing gloves
- Avoid compost

### **Try not to get cuts**

- Use an electric shaver, not a razor
- Clean yourself well and gently after going to the bathroom. Let your nurse know if your rectal area is sore or bleeds
- Prevent constipation. If you need a laxative, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for help. You should avoid rectal suppositories or enemas when your white blood cells are low
- Don't squeeze pimples



### **Check with your doctor or nurse**

- Before you take any medicine. This includes aspirin, acetaminophen (such as Tylenol ®), or ibuprofen (such as Advil ®)
- Before you get any shot or vaccine
- Before you have any dental check-ups or work done on your teeth

### **Are there other methods for managing cancer-related low blood counts (neutropenia)?**

In some cases, your doctor may order a treatment that is given by injection or IV. This treatment uses special proteins that help the bone marrow make more white blood cells, red blood cells, or even platelets. Growth factors work like your body does when it is healthy and normal.

If you develop any signs or symptoms of infection, you need to seek medical attention right away. Some of the signs and symptoms of infection include:

### **Call your doctor or nurse right away if you develop any signs or symptoms of infection.**

Some of the signs and symptoms of infection include:

- Fever that is 100.5°F (38° c) or higher. You should be taking your temperature at least once a day if your white blood cell count is low. If you feel unwell you should take your temperature more often to see if you have a fever
- Chills or shaking
- Cough with yellow or green coloured sputum (sticky mucus from the lungs)
- Sore throat with a fever
- Ear pain
- Headache or bad sinus pain
- Stiff or sore neck
- Bloody or cloudy urine
- Pain or burning when you urinate
- Skin rash
- Sores or white coating in your mouth or on your tongue
- Redness, warmth, swelling or drainage from a wound. Watch for swelling or soreness if you have a catheter or other tube in place

