

# Infection during cancer treatment

Some cancer treatments can reduce the number of white blood cells in your blood (*neutropenia*).

This means the body can't fight infection as well as usual so any infection you get can become serious. It is important to know how to reduce your risk of infection and recognise the signs of infection.

## How can I reduce the risk of infection?

### Wash your hands with soap and water:

- before eating or preparing meals
- after touching raw meat
- after going to the toilet
- after being in public places

Use alcohol-based hand rub if you can't access soap and water.

### Look after your body

- brush your teeth after each meal and before bed (use a soft toothbrush and rinse with alcohol-free mouthwash)
- have a shower or bath every day
- keep your bottom area clean after going to the toilet
- keep any cuts and scrapes clean
- wear sunscreen to prevent sunburn.

### Keep away from germs

- keep away from people who have illnesses you can catch, e.g. cold, flu or chickenpox
- try to stay away from crowds
- avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- don't share food, cups, utensils or personal items such as toothbrushes
- wash or peel fruit and vegetables before you eat them
- don't eat raw fish, seafood, meat or eggs
- cook meat well before you eat it

## Important

### Contact your doctor or nurse immediately if you have:

- a temperature of 38°C or higher
- chills, sweats, shivers or shakes
- a headache or stiff neck
- a sore throat, cough or cold
- shortness of breath
- feeling of faintness, dizziness or fast heartbeat
- sores in your mouth or a white coating on your tongue
- a rash or redness on your skin
- swelling, redness or tenderness, especially around a wound, a catheter site, or your rectal area
- uncontrolled diarrhoea or vomiting
- cloudy urine (wee), pain or blood when you pass urine

**If you can't contact your doctor or nurse, go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.**

**Say that you are having cancer treatment. A high temperature while your white cells are low is called *febrile neutropenia* and needs urgent medical attention.**



### Learn how to take your temperature

- Have a working thermometer at home in a handy location
- Ask your doctor or nurse to show you the right way to take your temperature

**IMPORTANT: You can have an infection without a temperature. Always contact your doctor or nurse if you feel ill.**

## What else should I know?

### Medicines

Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before taking any medicines. Some medicines can hide the signs of infection. These include paracetamol, aspirin and ibuprofen.

### Vaccinations

Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before you have any vaccinations.

### Pets and other animals

Animals can carry infections. Wash your hands after touching pets or other animals. If possible, don't clean up poo from cats, dogs or other animals, or clean out fish tanks, bird cages or cat litter trays.

### Gardening

Wear gloves and protective clothing for gardening and wash your hands well afterwards. Keep away from compost and potting mix because these can carry germs.

### Building and renovations

Try to avoid dust from building sites or home renovations which can sometimes cause infection.

### Swimming

Don't swim in rivers, lakes or public pools or go in hot tubs.

### Dental work

Talk to your doctor before having dental work done.

### Family illness

If someone in your family gets ill, contact your doctor or nurse for advice.

### Things to ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist

- When should I call you?
- When should I take my temperature?
- How do I take my temperature?

### Contact numbers:

Daytime: \_\_\_\_\_

Night/weekend: \_\_\_\_\_

## Common questions

### When can I get an infection?

The biggest risk of neutropenia and infection is 7-14 days after each chemotherapy treatment but you can get infections at any time.

### How do infections happen?

Infections come from germs. There are different kinds of germs, e.g. bacteria, viruses and fungi.

#### How can germs get into the body?

#### What should you do?

#### From the air when you breathe

- Keep away from people who are sick, e.g. coughing and sneezing
- Keep away from garden compost and building dust

#### Through your mouth when you eat, drink or touch your mouth with your hands

- Wash your hands before eating
- Wash or peel fruit and vegetables and cook meat and shellfish properly
- Ask for information about food safety and listeria
- Don't clean up after animals
- Don't swim in rivers, lakes or public pools or go in hot tubs.

#### Into your blood through breaks in the skin

- Keep cuts and scrapes clean
- Don't squeeze pimples
- Use an electric razor for shaving

### Will I know if I have neutropenia?

You will have regular blood tests during your treatment to check your neutrophil levels. You can have neutropenia without knowing so you should always be careful.

### Is there any treatment for neutropenia?

Some people with neutropenia get injections to help the body make more white cells to help fight infections. Your doctor will tell you if you need these. Even if you have injections, you can still get an infection.



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.