Infection during cancer treatment

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Cancer Treatments Online

During chemotherapy some people get low levels of neutrophils. These are white blood cells that help your body to fight infection. Having low levels of neutrophils is called neutropenia. If you have neutropenia, your body can't fight infection as well as usual. Infections during chemotherapy can be serious so it is important to know the correct safety precautions to protect yourself.

How can I reduce the risk of infection?

Wash your hands with soap and water

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

Look after your body

- brush your teeth after each meal and before you go to bed (use a soft toothbrush and rinse with alcohol-free mouthwash)
- have a shower or bath every day
- use an electric razor if you need to shave
- keep your bottom area clean after going to the toilet
- keep any cuts and scrapes clean

Keep away from germs

- keep away from people who are sick with illnesses you can catch, e.g. cold, flu, measles or chicken pox
- try to stay away from crowds, e.g. go shopping or to the movies at times when it is not busy
- 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
- don't clean up any pet or animal poo
- don't swim in public pools or go in hot tubs

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
- sores in your mouth
- a rash or redness on your skin
- swelling, redness or tenderness, especially around a wound, a catheter site, or your rectal area
- uncontrolled diarrhoea
- 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.

Learn how to take your temperature

- Make sure you have a thermometer at home.
- Ask your doctor or nurse the right way to take your temperature.

REMEMBER: If your temperature is 38°C or higher, contact your doctor or nurse immediately, or go to the hospital emergency department.

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

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What else should I know?

Medicines

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

Vaccinations

Ask your doctor or nurse before you have any vaccinations. Stay away from people who have recently had a live vaccine, like chicken pox or the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine.

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. 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 because the water could cause infections.

Family illness

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

Glossary

Neutrophils = white blood cells that help to protect your body from infection

Neutropenia = low levels of neutrophils

Febrile neutropenia = low levels of neutrophils and a high temperature

Infection = an illness you can catch, like a cold or chicken pox

Germs = living things that are too small to see and can cause infections. These include bacteria, viruses and fungi

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 public pools
Into your blood	• Keep cuts and scrapes clean • Don't squeeze pimples • Use an electric razor

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 to make more white cells. Your doctor will tell you if you need these. Even if you have injections, you can still get an infection.

Things to ask your doctor or nurse

✓ **When should I call you?**
✓ **When should I take my temperature?**
✓ **How do I take my temperature?**
✓ **How do I prevent infection?**

Contact numbers:

Daytime: ………………………………………………..

Night/weekend: ……………………………………..……

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