

PREVENTING Infections

Chemotherapy can slow down the work your bone marrow does. Your bone marrow makes white blood cells, which help you to fight off infections. With fewer white blood cells being made by your body, you are at risk for infection. Low white blood cell count is called “neutropenia.”

The risk for infection is highest seven to 10 days after chemotherapy is given. Infections may come from the environment, other people and from your own body.

What to do:

- Wash hands often; including family and caregivers. Use hand sanitizers:
 - Before, during and after cooking
 - Before eating
 - After going to the bathroom, changing diapers or helping child use the bathroom
 - After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
 - After touching your pet or cleaning up after your pet
 - After touching trash
- If you have an IV catheter device, wash your hands before and after caring for your catheter, port or other access device. Follow directions given by the health care team to change dressing and caps, and flush the catheter.
- Bathe daily, paying special attention to areas under the arm, around genital areas and under skinfolds which hold bacteria.
- Check your temperature regularly. Report any temperature above 100.5 degrees F to your doctor or nurse.
- Prevent injury to skin such as tears, cuts or friction.
- Minimize exposure to school-age children or children in day care.
- Wash raw fruits and vegetables very well.
- Check expiration dates on food; throw dented cans away.
- Try to stay away from large crowds if you can.

What not to do:

- **DO NOT** visit with friends or family who are sick or coughing.
- **DO NOT** get a live vaccination unless you get approval from your doctor.
- **DO NOT** thaw foods at room temperature. Thaw food in the refrigerator or you can also thaw food in frequently changed cold water or in the microwave, but cook it as soon as it thaws.
- **DO NOT** drink unpasteurized milk and juices. Avoid raw and undercooked eggs, meats, poultry, fish and sprouts.

When to call the doctor:

Tell your doctor or nurse immediately if you notice any signs of infection:

- Temperature greater than 100.5 degrees F
- New cough (may or may not have mucus with cough)
- Shortness of breath
- Burning pain when you urinate (pee)
- Diarrhea lasting more than 24 hours
- Red, swollen or draining IV catheter site
- Mouth sores, herpes lesions or white patches in your mouth
- Shaking chills or body aches
- Skin breakdown or open sores

Additional resources:

See “Chemotherapy and You” booklet from the National Cancer Institute.