

Preventing Infections When Your White Blood Cell Count is Low

Low white blood cell (WBC) count is called neutropenia. Chemotherapy, radiation therapy, other treatments or an illness may cause a low WBC count. A low WBC count makes you more likely to get an infection.

Often the only sign of an infection in a person with cancer is a fever. Most people getting cancer treatments are told to check their temperature 2 times each day while their WBC count is low. Your doctor or nurse may give you other instructions. Do not take any medicines such as Tylenol to lower your temperature unless directed by your doctor.

When your WBC is low, you need to take extra care to prevent infection.

To Help Prevent Infection:

Hygiene

- Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds with warm water and soap. Wash before eating, when preparing food, and after using the toilet. Anyone caring for you should do the same.
- Shower or take a bath every day if you are allowed.
- Do not take bubble baths or use hot tubs.
- Check your skin closely for cuts, rashes, redness and swelling. Call your doctor if you have problems.
- After you urinate or have a bowel movement, always wipe from your front to your back. Wash your hands.
- Use an electric razor for shaving to avoid cuts.
- Use a soft bristle toothbrush to clean your teeth after eating and before bedtime. If you have dentures, clean them in the morning and evening.
- Inspect your mouth each day. Call your doctor if you have any redness, white patches, cuts or bumps.
- Wear a mask or leave the room when it is being cleaned.
- Do not use douches or tampons.
- Use a condom and a water-based lubricant such as K-Y Jelly when having sexual intercourse. Do not use a diaphragm or IUD.

Food Safety

- Do not eat raw or undercooked foods such as:
 - Fresh fruit or vegetables
 - Raw eggs, meat or fish
- Cook meat, fish and eggs well done.
- Use only **pasteurized** milk, cheeses, yogurt or cream.
- Do not leave drinks sitting out for more than 2 hours.

Other Tips

- Get plenty of rest. Try to get about 8 hours of sleep a night.
- Walk, or at least sit up in a chair, 3 to 4 times a day. Pace yourself and do not get too tired.
- Avoid people with infections such as colds, flu, cold sores, shingles, chicken pox, measles and mumps.
- Avoid people who have had vaccines in the past few weeks. Vaccines could be for polio, rubella, mumps, measles, yellow fever or smallpox.
- Ask your doctor before getting vaccines when your WBC count is low.
- Do not clean birdcages, fish tanks or cat litter boxes. If there is no one to help you, wear rubber gloves and throw them away after every use.
- Wear gloves when gardening. Avoid plants and live flowers in vases.
- Have your furnace filters changed each month.

Call your doctor right away if you have:

- A fever over 100.4 degrees F or 38 degrees C
- Chills or sweats
- Any signs of infection such as redness, warmth, swelling, drainage or pain
- Sweats
- Feel more tired
- Sore throat or mouth
- A cough
- Pain or burning when passing urine
- Cloudy or bloody urine

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns