NEUTROPENIA/INFECTION

The term neutropenia is used to describe a low white blood cell count (WBC). White blood cells are the cells that fight infection in your body. Chemotherapy often causes a decrease in the number of these cells but this is a normal side effect. If your WBC count is too low, we will not be able to do your treatment and you will be given infection precautions by the nurse. There are medications that can be given to help boost your WBCs. Your healthcare team will talk with you about these medications, if needed.

When am I at the highest risk for infection?

The term 'nadir' means low point. You are at the highest risk for infection when you are at your nadir period after each chemo cycle. This usually occurs seven to ten days after your treatment day.

What are the symptoms of infection I should look for?

Fever is often the first sign of infection. Call your physician's office if you run a fever of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. Do not take medications that will reduce your fever without your physician's approval. These are medications such as ibuprofen (Motrin® or Advil®), naproxen (Aleve®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®).

Other symptoms of infection include:

- Chills
- Swelling or redness anywhere on the body, especially a wound, IV site or port
- A new or worsening cough
- Pain with urination or cloudy urine

If you experience chills, dizziness, shortness of breath, changes in mental status or confusion, go to the nearest Emergency Room or call 911 for assistance.

Things to do to prevent infection:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Be sure to wash your hands before cooking and eating, after you use the bathroom, blow your nose, cough, sneeze, or touch animals. Carry hand sanitizer for times when you are not near soap and water.
- Use sanitizing wipes to clean surfaces and items that you touch. This includes public telephones, ATM machines, doorknobs, and other common items.
- Be gentle and thorough when you wipe yourself after a bowel movement. Instead of toilet paper, use a baby wipe or squirt of water from a spray bottle to clean yourself. Let your doctor or nurse know if your rectal area is sore or bleeds or if you have hemorrhoids.
- Stay away from people who are sick. This includes people with colds, flu, measles, or chicken pox. You also need to stay away from children who just had a "live virus" vaccine for chicken pox or polio.
- Do not get a flu shot or other type of vaccine without first asking your doctor or nurse. Some vaccines contain a live virus. Discuss any questions about vaccines with your doctor or nurse.
- Stay away from crowds. For instance, plan to go shopping or to the movies when the stores and theaters are less crowded. If you must go to a crowded place, wear a mask to protect yourself.

- Be careful not to cut or nick yourself. Do not cut or tear your nail cuticles. Use an electric shaver instead of a razor. Use caution when using scissors, needles, or knives. It is not recommended to get your nails done at a nail salon while on treatment due to the potential for introduction of bacteria.

- If you have a catheter, watch for signs of infection or skin changes. Signs to look for include drainage, redness, swelling or soreness. Tell your doctor or nurse about any changes you notice near your catheter.

- Maintain good oral care. Brush your teeth after meals and before you go to bed. Use a very soft toothbrush. You can make the bristles even softer by running hot water over them just before you brush. Use a mouth rinse that does not contain alcohol. Check with your doctor or nurse before going to the dentist.

- Take good care of your skin. Do not squeeze or scratch pimples. Use lotion to soften and heal dry, cracked skin. Dry yourself after a bath or shower by gently patting your skin. Be careful not to rub your skin.

- Clean cuts right away. Use warm water, soap, and an antiseptic to clean your cuts. Clean your cut like this every day until your cut has a scab over it.

- Be careful around animals. Do not clean your cat's litter box, pick up dog waste or clean bird cages or fish tanks. Be sure to wash your hands after touching pets and/or other animals.

- Practice food safety rules. Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Do not leave leftovers sitting out. Put them in the refrigerator as soon as you are done eating.

- Wash raw vegetables and fruits well before eating them. Avoid those that cannot be washed well, such as raspberries or lettuce.

- Do not eat raw or undercooked fish, seafood, meat, chicken, or eggs. These foods may have bacteria that can cause infection.

FLCancer.com/PatientEducation