
How can I protect myself from infection when my neutrophil counts are low?

Wash your hands often

Washing your hands can help keep germs away, which can help to prevent infection. Wash your hands when they are dirty and at the following times:

- Before preparing food to eat.
- After touching raw meat like chicken or steak.
- Before eating.
- After using the restroom.
- After changing a baby's diaper.
- After coming in direct contact with someone who is very young or very old.
- After touching animals such as dogs and cats.

Be sure to wash your hands the right way. Here's how to do it:

- First, find a towel to dry your hands. A paper towel is better to use because germs can live on a wet cloth towel. Get the paper towel out before you wash your hands to keep from touching the knob or container with your clean hands. Put the towel under your arm until you are ready to use it.
- Wet your hands with water. Warm water is best. Hot water can make your skin dry and itchy.
- Put soap on your hands. Liquid soap is better because germs can live on bar soap. Bar soap is OK to use as long as you dry it on a soap bar.
- Rub your hands together for 10 to 15 seconds or until all dirt is gone. To do a good job you need to wash in between your fingers, the back of your hands and your thumbs and under your fingernails. If you do not wash in all of these places, you may not remove all of the germs.

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Tips for your daily care

- Shower or bathe daily. If your skin becomes dry, use lotion or oil to soften your skin and prevent cracking.
- Brush your teeth. Use a soft toothbrush and mouth rinses without alcohol. Do not floss. Check with your doctor before having dental work done.
- Wear shoes or slippers to protect your feet from injury.
- Do not get manicures and pedicures.
- Clean cuts and scrapes with soap and water and cover with a bandage.
- Do not use razors. Use an electric shaver.

Resource

Georgia-Pacific Health Smart Institute
www.gphealthsmart.com

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Preventing Infection During Your Chemotherapy Treatment



Why worry about infection?

Chemotherapy is very important in fighting cancer. It gets rid of the cells that make up a tumor. At the same time it is getting rid of these cancer cells, chemotherapy also kills some of the good blood cells that help fight infection. These cells are called neutrophils. Neutrophils are needed to fight off infection. There may not be enough neutrophils during chemotherapy to fight off the germs that cause colds and flu and other types of germs. Because the chemotherapy can't tell the difference between the good and bad cells, you are more likely to get infections. This is a good reason to take special care to protect against infection. There are some things that you can do during chemotherapy treatments to help keep from getting sick.

Keep your immune system strong!

It is very important to keep your body strong and healthy during your cancer treatment. By doing only a few easy things, you can protect your immune system. These are some important steps that you can do to help protect yourself:

- **Get plenty of sleep**

By getting 8 to 10 hours of sleep a night you can help your body fight infection. Let your doctor know if you are having trouble sleeping.

- **Drink plenty of fluids**

Drinking fluids (especially water) keeps your organs healthy and strong. It allows the chemotherapy to do a better job of getting rid of cancer cells.

- **Eat a balanced diet**

Eating a good diet is the best way to help your body fight infection. Eat from all of the food groups including meat and dairy, bread and cereal, and fruits and vegetables. Take a multivitamin everyday if it is OK with your doctor.

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- Rinse your hands with warm water. Make sure you rinse between your fingers and under rings. If you do not get all of the soap off, it could cause your skin to itch.
- Dry your hands with a soft paper towel. Pat your hands dry because rubbing might damage your skin. If there is a blow dryer to dry your hands, push the button with you elbow. This will keep germs from getting back on your clean hands.
- Use the towel to turn off the water. If you touch the water faucet after you wash your hands, you might get more germs back on you clean fingers.

Ask people who come in contact with you to wash their hands, too. People who come into contact with you can make you sick by bringing in germs from the outside. Don't be afraid to ask if they have washed their hands. This includes doctors, nurses, other health professionals, family members (including children), and visitors.

Beware of the food you eat

Germs that cause infection can be in the food you eat. You need to be careful about how you prepare food and also take care when eating out. During your chemotherapy treatments, your immune system may not be strong enough to fight off certain germs found in food. You need to be very careful. Here are the steps to keeping food safe:

- **Clean**

Wash hands, utensils, and surfaces with hot soapy water before and after food preparation, and especially after preparing meat poultry, eggs or seafood.

- **Separate**

Keep raw meat, poultry, eggs, and seafood away from ready-to-eat foods. Do not place cooked food on an unwashed plate where raw meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood has been.

- **Cook**

Cook foods well. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature. Cook meat until it is no longer pink and the juices run clear. Cook eggs until they are firm. Bring sauces, soups, and gravies to a boil when reheating.

- **Chill**

Keep cold foods cold. Refrigerate or freeze foods that may spoil. Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours and make sure the refrigerator temperature is no higher than 40 °F. and the freezer temperature is 0 °F. Never thaw food at room temperature; thaw food in the refrigerator. Don't pack the refrigerator too full—cool air must be able to circulate to keep food cold and safe.

Take care when dining out

Check out the restaurants when you dine out to be sure that your food is prepared safely:

- Find out how the restaurant did on its last inspection. Most restaurants post their scores.
- Check the restroom before you order. If you see a dirty restroom it's likely the restaurant is not very clean either. If the restroom is dirty, it is better not to eat there.
- Look at the overall appearance of the restaurant. Look at the physical surroundings. If they are not up to your standards, you might want to consider eating somewhere else.
- Check for freshness of the food. Foods such as fruits and vegetables should look and smell fresh. Salads should not be wilted; if they are, it could be a sign they are old or have not been stored properly.
- Cooked food that has been left out can spoil in just a few hours. The best way to keep from getting sick from the food you eat is by not letting food sit out too long.