



CANCER  
INFAMILY  
— build knowledge



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## INFECTION

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*This leaflet discusses the increased risk of infection, which can occur during chemotherapy. Ask your doctor if you should expect this side effect in the course of your treatment.*

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# Risk of infection

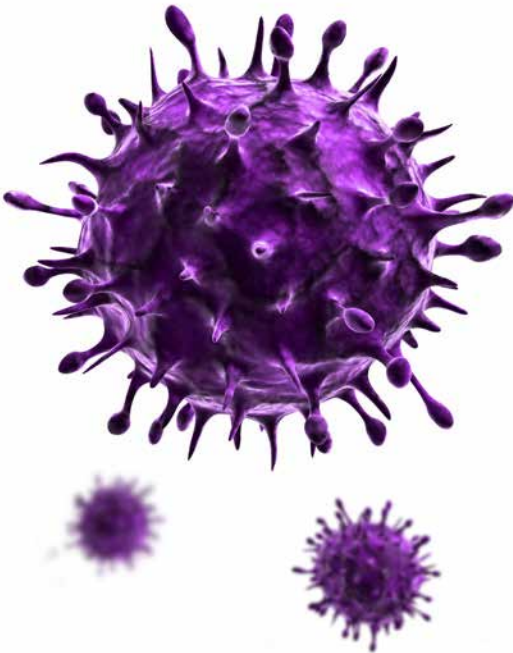
## *Low numbers of white blood cells (leukopenia)*

Having an abnormally low number of white blood cells (leukocytes) disturbs the body's ability to fight infections. Neutrophils - a type of leukocytes - are especially important to eliminate bacterial or fungal infections. If your leukocyte numbers are too low, your doctor might have to stop chemotherapy, reduce its dosage, or, alternatively, give

you a growth factor to increase the bone marrow's leukocyte production.

It is important that you recognize infection signs to tell your doctor as soon as they develop. Infections can appear everywhere in the body, but in cancer patients they are most common in the mouth, skin, lungs, urinary tract and rectum.

## *How to prevent infection:*



### **Behavior**

- ✘ Keep away from crowds, especially within confined spaces.
- ✘ Avoid contact with sick individuals. If necessary, use a facemask for protection.
- ✘ Avoid contact with people recently inoculated with live vaccines (e.g., chickenpox or smallpox vaccines). Check with your doctor about how long you should avoid contact with them.
- ✘ Do not get vaccinated without first checking with your oncologist.

## Food

- × Do not eat raw meat, fish or eggs, especially when your neutrophil count goes down. From your therapeutic schedule it is possible to predict when this occurs - ask your doctor for more information.
- × During these times also stay away from fresh "natural supplements" (unpasteurized) that could be contaminated with bacteria.



## Hygiene

- × Do not scratch or squeeze pimples to avoid infection. Do not cut, bite or pull fingernail cuticles as this can cause injuries.
- × Take a daily bath or shower with warm water (not hot). Wash yourself carefully under the arms, in the genital and rectal areas, and in the folds of the skin. Dry yourself by gently pressing the towel without rubbing the skin.
- × Use lotions or oils that soften, heal and protect the skin to prevent dryness or cracks.
- × Wash your hands before every meal, and after using the bathroom.
- × Clean your genital and anal areas gently with disposable wipes whenever you use the toilet. Inform your doctor or nurse if you notice irritation, itching, injuries or if you have hemorrhoids. Keep your groin and anal areas clean.
- × Use waterproof gloves to clean babies.



### Objects and Instruments

- ✘ Use an electric razor instead of a razor blade to prevent cuts to the skin.
- ✘ Be careful when using scissors, needles, knives or other sharp utensils.
- ✘ Avoid tampons, suppositories, clysters or rectal thermometers.



### Meals

- ✘ Always use gloves to cook or do the dishes.
- ✘ Do not share cutlery, dishes or glasses.
- ✘ Wash your mouth after every meal. Use an extra-soft toothbrush to avoid hurting your gums, and discuss with your doctor if flossing is okay.

### Garden

- ✘ Do not touch animal feces (e.g. when cleaning bird cages or sandboxes).
- ✘ Use gloves when gardening or handling compost products.

### Wounds

- ✘ Clean immediately any skin cuts or scratches with warm water and soap. Pass a cream with antibiotic and cover with gauze.
- ✘ Look for signs of infection (redness, swelling, pus). Inform your doctor or nurse if any is detected.



### Beauty treatments

- × Do not get manicures, pedicures, wax or tattoos without talking first to your doctor or nurse.
- × Do not shave your scalp or other parts of the body.

### Clinical appointments

- × Postpone the dentist or any non-urgent invasive procedure.
- × Talk to your doctor or nurse to schedule these according to your cancer treatment schedule to be at your most resilient and avoid potential complications.



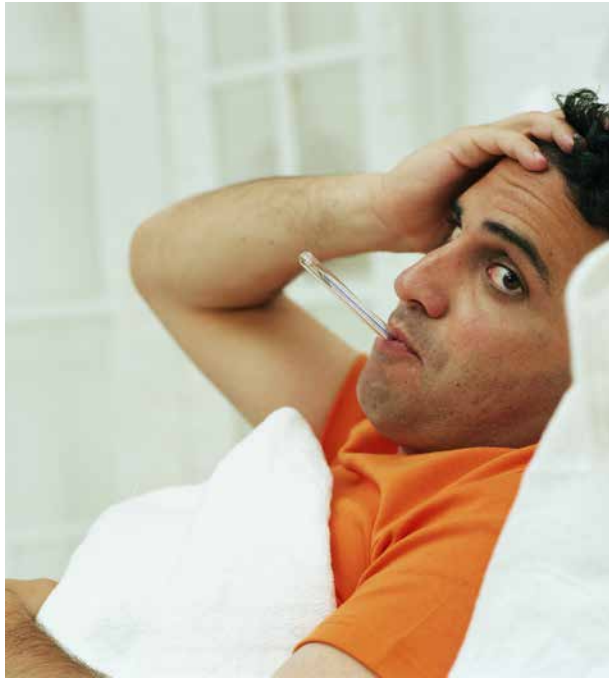
## Symptoms of infection can be:

- × Fever - 38°C or more (temperature taken in the armpit), 38.3°C or more (temperature taken in the mouth or anus).
- × Chills.
- × Sweat.
- × Soft stool (although this can also be a side effect of chemotherapy).
- × Burning sensation when urinating.
- × Cough or sore throat, yellow / green phlegm.
- × Unusual vaginal discharge, or itching.
- × Redness, swelling or tenderness, especially around a cut, wound, spot, intravenous insertion site or a central venous catheter.
- × Abdominal pain (belly pain).

**Tell your doctor immediately if you have signs of infection.**

If you believe you are running a fever, check the temperature every 4 hours. Talk to your doctor, in particular if the fever appeared 1-2 weeks after treatment.

Do not use acetylsalicylic acid (e.g. Aspirin®), paracetamol (e.g. Benuron®), or any other medicine to lower the temperature without first checking with your doctor.



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**Sources:** American Cancer Society, Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Mayo Clinic and recent research papers / **Scientific Review:** Maria Rita Dionísio, Médica Oncologista, Fundação Champalimaud / **Content:** Susana Lamas, Catarina Amorim / **Project coordination:** Filipe Santos Silva / **Design:** [www.estudiorjdesign.com](http://www.estudiorjdesign.com) / **Illustrations:** [www.zecardoso.com/](http://www.zecardoso.com/) / **Project by:** Public Awareness of Cancer Unit, IPATIMUP October 2018 / + **info:** [www.cancronafamilia.org](http://www.cancronafamilia.org)

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