

# Information Sheet: Cancer Treatment & Infection

White blood cells, red blood cells and platelets are specialised cells made by the bone marrow. One type of white blood cell is called the neutrophil. Neutrophils are important in helping your body to fight infections.

Chemotherapy can reduce the number of neutrophils in your blood. When this happens, you are said to be “neutropenic”. When you are neutropenic, **YOU MAY BE MORE AT RISK OF INFECTION.**

It is important that you tell your doctor if you feel you are developing a cold or other signs of infection. If early signs of infection are not treated, you may become very ill, quite quickly.

## What things can I do to reduce my risk of infection?

### **Avoid exposing yourself to infection as much as possible**

- ❖ Avoid close or prolonged contact with people who have signs of infection, such as colds or flu.
- ❖ Try to avoid crowded places.
- ❖ Avoid people who have been exposed to someone with an infectious disease, e.g. a child with chickenpox or people who have recently been vaccinated.

### **Try to prevent infections from occurring**

- ❖ Keep your body clean by bathing/showering daily and washing your hands before eating and after using the bathroom.
- ❖ Keep your mouth clean by brushing your teeth and rinsing your mouth at least 3 times per day and gently flossing at least once per day. (Check with your doctor that your platelets are okay before flossing).
- ❖ Always wear shoes to prevent injury to your feet.
- ❖ Protect your hands from cuts and burns. Wear gloves while gardening and wear rubber gloves when doing housework.
- ❖ If you do get a cut, wash the cut promptly with soap and warm water and apply a clean dressing if necessary.
- ❖ Continue to eat a well balanced diet.
- ❖ Do not share food, drink cups, utensils, or other personal items like toothbrushes.

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- ❖ Avoid constipation and straining to have a bowel movement by using medication that will soften the stool.
- ❖ Do not change cat litter or clean up animal droppings yourself: have someone else do it for you.
- ❖ Speak to your doctor first before getting any vaccinations.

## How will I know if I have an infection?

- ❖ A fever (temperature of 38° C or higher)
- ❖ Chills or sweating
- ❖ A sore throat or sores in the mouth
- ❖ Abdominal pain
- ❖ Pain or burning when passing urine or frequent urination
- ❖ Diarrhoea or sores around the anus
- ❖ A cough or breathlessness
- ❖ Any redness, swelling, or pain, particularly around a cut or wound

Present to the hospital **IMMEDIATELY** if you have:

A fever, that is, A TEMPERATURE ABOVE 38 DEGREES (any time of the day or night) or any other signs of infection as listed above.

## Be prepared to tell them:

- ❖ The date of your last chemotherapy and;
- ❖ Your highest temperature in the last 24 hours and;
- ❖ If you have had any shaking or chills and;
- ❖ Any symptoms of infection you have and;
- ❖ If you feel dizzy or light-headed.
- ❖ A cough or breathlessness

**We encourage you to speak with your healthcare team if you have any concerns about hair loss during your treatment.**

We welcome feedback at:

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The information in this brochure is intended as a guide to one of the services provided by BRHS and is correct at the time of publishing. Adapted from Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre brochure.

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Bairnsdale Regional Health Service is located on the traditional land of the Gunai Kurnai people.

My team *is* **BRHS**