I Have Neutropenia—What Do I Need to Know?

Neutropenia means having an abnormally low number of neutrophils, a type of white blood cell that fights infection, in the blood.

What Is Neutropenia?
Neutropenia increases the risk of developing infections, which can become very severe. About half of all patients receiving chemotherapy develop neutropenia.

What Should I Do If I Have Neutropenia?
It is important to prevent infection and recognize it early if it develops. Lifestyle and diet practices help lower the risk of infection.

Recognize Possible Infection and Seek Urgent Help
Patients with neutropenia should notify their cancer care team immediately and go to the nearest emergency department if they develop any of the following:
• Fever that is higher than 100.4°F or 38°C taken by mouth.
• Chills, sweats, or shivering.
• Sore throat or painful mouth sores or ulcers.
• Neck pain or a stiff neck.
• Confusion or “seeming different.”
• Cough or shortness of breath.
• Pain or burning with urination.
• Red, itchy, or painful skin, especially around intravenous catheters and the rectal area.
• Abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, or pain with bowel movements.
• Pain in or discharge from genital areas or pain during intercourse.

Lowering infection risk in patients with neutropenia

Wash hands with soap and water frequently, particularly before eating and after using the bathroom, coughing or sneezing, touching surfaces in public areas, touching pets, and disposing trash.
Carry an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to clean hands when out of the house.
Shower daily, and use a soft toothbrush to brush teeth at least twice daily.
Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly under running water before eating.
Clean cooking surfaces, counters, and utensils with hot soapy water before cooking.
Keep raw meat, poultry, and fish and their juices away from other foods and utensils to prevent contamination.
Cook meats, poultry, fish, and eggs thoroughly, and use a food thermometer if needed to ensure adequate cooking.
Chill and refrigerate foods promptly.
Ensure you and family members are up to date on vaccines.
Ask your doctor which vaccines you can safely receive.

Do not share personal items such as towels, razors, or toothbrushes.
Do not get manicures or pedicures at salons or spas.
Do not place anything in the anus including thermometers or suppositories.
Do not practice anal intercourse.
Avoid the use of tampons. It is safe to use sanitary pads.
Limit exposure to soil and dirt. Wear gloves if gardening or doing yardwork.
Avoid exposure when cleaning up after pets, their cages, or litter boxes.
Avoid crowded places such as concerts, places with dust such as construction sites, and saunas, public pools, ponds, and lakes.
Avoid exposure to children or adults with a fever or infection.
Do not bring live plants or fresh flowers into the living area.
Do not thaw foods at room temperature.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
American Cancer Society: Infections in People with Cancer
Safe Food Handling: What you need to know
https://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm255180.htm
Febrile Neutropenia
https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaoncology/fullarticle/2645851

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