

Effects of a Low White Blood Cell Count During Chemotherapy

White Blood Cells Protect You

Watch this video of how white blood cells protect against infection by attacking germs that enter your body.

Chemotherapy and White Blood Cells

Chemotherapy is a commonly used treatment for cancer. These powerful cancer-fighting drugs work by killing the fastest-growing cells in the body—both good

and bad. This means that along with killing cancer cells, your healthy white blood cells, called neutrophils, are killed too.

When the number of neutrophils is reduced, a condition called neutropenia occurs and your risk for getting an infection is increased. Between 7-12 days after you finish each chemotherapy dose—and possibly lasting for 5-7 days, your white blood cells are at their lowest numbers. This period of time is often called your nadir, meaning “lowest point”. This is when you are more likely to develop neutropenia. This period varies slightly depending upon the chemotherapy drug, or combination of drugs, used. Your doctor and/or nurse will let you know exactly when your white blood cell count is likely to be at its lowest.

You should watch very carefully for signs and symptoms of infection during this time. During these high-risk days, you should take your temperature any time you feel warm, flushed, chilled, or not well.

How Chemotherapy Affects Your White Blood Cells

Watch this video that shows what happens when the number of white blood cells is reduced (a condition called neutropenia)