

# HEALTH TIP SHEET

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INFECTION



### Fever

Many times, fever may be our body's only sign of an infection. Infections during chemotherapy can be life threatening and may delay future chemotherapy treatments. Because your white blood cell count is low, your body may not be able to fight the infection on its own.

This is why it's very important that you call your doctor immediately, even if it is in the middle of the night, if you have a temperature of 100.4°F or higher for more than 1 hour, or a one-time temperature of 101°F or higher.

### Monitoring Your Temperature

You should also be sure to do the following:

- Keep a working thermometer in a convenient location and know how to use it.
- Take your temperature any time you feel warm, flushed, chilled, or not well.
- Be aware of when you are likely to be at highest risk for infection due to a low white blood cell count. Your doctor and/or nurse will let you know when your white blood cell count is likely to be at its lowest. This period is sometimes referred to as the nadir, which means "lowest point". During your nadir, the period of time beginning 7–12 days after you finish each chemotherapy dose—and possibly lasting up to one week—is when you may be at the greatest risk for infection.
- Keep your doctor's phone numbers with you at all times. Make sure you know what number to call during their office hours and what number to call after hours. If you have a fever during a time when the office is closed, DO NOT wait until the office reopens before you call.
- If you have to go to the emergency room, it's important that you tell the person checking you in that you are a cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy. This is because if you have an infection you shouldn't sit in the waiting room for a long time. Infections can get very serious the longer they go untreated.

### What is Nadir?

Chemotherapy treatment will usually involve a number of chemotherapy doses (sometimes called cycles). The period of time beginning 7–12 days after you finish each chemotherapy dose—and possibly lasting up to one week—is when you have the fewest white blood cells in your body. Because of this, it will be extra hard for your body to fight off germs during this time.

This period of time is sometimes referred to as nadir, which means "lowest point". For example, if you have chemotherapy on August 7, you are at highest risk of picking up an infection between August 14 and August 19. This period varies slightly depending upon the chemotherapy drug, or combination of drugs, used.

### What Can You Do During Your Nadir?

- Find out from your doctor and/or nurse exactly when your white blood cell count will be at its lowest.
- Be extra careful during this time.
- Try to remember to take your temperature every evening, and call your doctor if you have a temperature of 100.4°F or higher for more than 1 hour, or a one-time temperature of 101°F or higher.

**If you are receiving chemotherapy, you may be at risk for getting an infection. Take the right steps toward preventing infections during cancer treatment by visiting [www.PreventCancerInfections.org](http://www.PreventCancerInfections.org)**



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## **Additional Signs and Symptoms**

While developing a fever is the most serious side effect and should be treated as an emergency, there are several other signs or symptoms you should be aware of that may indicate you have an infection:

- Chills and sweats
- Change in cough or new cough
- Sore throat or new mouth sore
- Shortness of breath
- Nasal congestion
- Stiff neck
- Burning or pain with urination
- Unusual vaginal discharge or irritation
- Increased urination
- Redness, soreness, or swelling in any area, including surgical wounds and ports
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Pain in the abdomen or rectum
- New onset of pain
- Changes in skin, urination, and mental status

If you experience any of these signs or symptoms you should call your doctor immediately