

A Patient's Guide to managing Neutropenia at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Identification

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment sheet and your hospital name band each time you attend.

You must wear your name band at all times whilst in hospital.

This leaflet has been written in accordance with the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre protocol for neutropenic patients.

It has been written by oncologists, nurses, other health professionals, patients and carers at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

If you have difficulty reading this size of print, a version of this leaflet or any of our leaflets can be produced for you in a larger print.

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Introduction

Neutropenia is the term used when the number of white blood cells (neutrophils) in your blood is reduced, increasing your risk of getting an infection.

This leaflet explains what happens when you have neutropenia and why you may need to be admitted to hospital. It is not always possible to prevent neutropenia. This leaflet offers some guidelines to help reduce your chance of developing infections while you are at risk.

If there is anything in this leaflet which is unclear or there are still questions which it does not answer, please contact a member of the team caring for you, to get more advice.

Blood is made up of many different types of cells which are produced in the bone marrow. They can be broadly divided into three groups:

- red blood cells (RBC): which carry oxygen around the body
- white blood cells (WBC): which help your body fight infection
- platelets: which help blood to clot

Neutrophils are the group of white blood cells which are capable of killing bacteria. They defend the body against infection. If you have a decreased number of neutrophils then you have less protection against infections.

Infections can come from bacteria carried on your skin or in your gastrointestinal tract (stomach and bowel). They can also be transferred from other people through contact with their hands and clothes.

Neutropenia is one of the side-effects of chemotherapy

and sometimes radiotherapy, because the cancer treatment slows down the rate at which your bone marrow produces neutrophils.

Neutropenia usually occurs 7-14 days after your treatment. Your neutrophil count should recover before your next cycle of chemotherapy. If it has not recovered enough your doctor may delay your next treatment or prescribe a drug to help you to produce more neutrophils.

Please be aware that many patients will become neutropenic for a short while during their treatment.

For most patients, this will result in no ill effects. A small minority, however, may develop infections requiring a stay in hospital for antibiotic treatment.

If you do need to spend a while as an inpatient, the following sections will try to explain what will happen during your stay.

When you are first admitted

When you are first admitted to hospital, samples of your urine, sputum (if any) and blood will be needed in order to assess your condition. Your doctor may also want you to have a chest X-ray.

If you have a temperature, you will be given antibiotics into a vein. This is the most effective way of treating an infection.

Your doctor will take daily blood samples to monitor your white cell count. Until this reaches a safe level, you may need to be in a private room and any visitors will be required to take extra care to avoid infecting you.

Your team of nurses will be monitoring your condition closely. They will regularly check your temperature, pulse and blood pressure. They will need a sample of urine to test each day, and will check your mouth, throat and the entry site of intravenous lines for any signs of infection.

Visitors and staff will wash their hands before entering the room, to protect you from infections.

What about visitors?

It is recommended that family or friends with an infection should not visit you. Talk to one of the nurses if you are unsure if someone should visit. Your visitors must wash their hands before they touch you. Visitors may also be asked to wear gloves, a gown.

This may all sound rather detailed but it is important you are protected from any infection so that your system can fully recover.

Am I allowed flowers and pot plants?

No. This is because bringing fresh, dried flowers or pot plants onto the ward increases the risk of infection.

Is there anything I can do to help myself?

The following advice may help to reduce the bacteria which may build up on your skin, in your mouth, stomach and bowel. These are bacteria that everyone carries, but they can cause infections when the immune system is weakened.

- When you take a shower/bath, dry yourself well, paying attention to skin folds i.e. groins, armpits and under your breasts.
Also check your skin for any spots or rashes (your nurses will help you if necessary).
- Use an electric razor rather than a wet razor. This will help prevent small cuts which may allow infection to enter the body through your skin.
- Wear fresh, clean day and night clothes each day.
- Maintain a good standard of hygiene by washing your hands well after using the toilet, and before touching any food.
- Hang your towel and flannel to dry between use.
Don't store them in any kind of plastic or sponge bag.
- Brush your teeth morning and evening, and floss daily. Rinse your mouth with the mouthwash provided after meals. If you have dentures, these should be removed, brushed and your mouth rinsed with freshly made mouthwash.
- Let your toothbrush dry in the air between use, don't keep it in a plastic bag or in a sponge bag.
- Check the inside of your mouth in a mirror each day.
Let your nurse know if you find any redness, ulcers or white patches.

- Your bedding will be changed daily.
- Ensure that your wash bowl and mug are kept clean and dry.
- Make sure you tell your nurse if you feel unwell in any way.
- You should be provided with plenty of fresh drinking water. Drink plenty to stay well hydrated. If your urine is a light clear yellow in colour then you are drinking enough.
- Avoid using tampons while you are neutropenic as they may increase your risk of infection.

Which foods are safe to eat?

When you are feeling unwell, and also when you are recovering from neutropenia, it is important to try to eat a healthy and balanced diet. You should take care to avoid all possible risk of infection from food. For Health and Safety reasons we are unable to reheat food on the ward.

When you return home, if using a microwave, make sure you heat food right through to the middle, as underheated food may still contain bacteria. Make sure frozen foods are completely defrosted before cooking (unless cooking instructions state otherwise). The chart on the next page explains which foods are safe/unsafe to eat.

Advice on food:

| | Safe | Not Safe |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Meat, fish & poultry | Meat, fish & poultry thoroughly cooked. Use before expiry date. Tinned food is safe. | Raw meat & raw fish such as Sushi, meat pâté. |
| Cheese | Processed cheese Cheese made from pasteurised milk e.g. Cheddar/Edam/Cream cheese, cottage cheese or cheese spread. | Cheese made from unpasteurised milk e.g. Camembert, Brie, blue veined cheeses. |
| Eggs | Always cook eggs so the yolk is hard. Mayonnaise made with pasteurised egg. | Partially cooked eggs. Foods with raw egg e.g. mousses, or fresh mayonnaise. |
| Soup | Hot soup Tinned soup Home made soup | Cold soup made of stock from meat, poultry or fish |
| Vegetables & salads | Well washed salad and vegetables or well cooked vegetables. | Raw unwashed vegetables. Bruised or damaged vegetables. Peppercorns & spices. |
| Fruit | Cooked & tinned fruit Washed & peeled fresh fruit | Unpeeled fruit. Bruised and damaged fruit. |
| Takeaways | Freshly cooked with fresh ingredients & eaten straight away | Re-heated takeaway food |

Once you are no longer neutropenic these diet restrictions no longer apply.

When you go home

As you are recovering from neutropenia, follow the advice below:

- If you are feeling feverish, or shivering, take your temperature, if it is 38°C or above, or 37.5°C for more than 1 hour, you must telephone the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre - see page opposite. It is important, if your temperature is 38°C or above, that you insist on having a full blood count, in case you need antibiotic treatment. It is important to show your Alert Card, so antibiotic treatment can be started within 1 hour of your arrival at hospital.
- Always keep this leaflet or your Alert Card with you whilst you are having chemotherapy or are recovering from neutropenia. This will make it easier for you to insist on having a full blood count test.
- If you are on steroids, ensure you carry your steroid treatment card.
- Avoid using tobacco or marijuana as it can often contain fungal spores. Aspergillosis is a type of fungal infection that can be found in dead leaves, grain stores, compost piles and in brick, mortar & cement dust. Try to avoid places where you may come into contact with it.
- Ensure pets' vaccines are up to date. Wash hands after handling pets and avoid handling animal waste, including litter trays and manure.
- Wear gloves when gardening and wash your hands when you have finished.

For further information ask one of the nurses treating you, or drop in or call the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre at Mount Vernon Hospital - see back cover.

Leaflets are available on common side-effects of chemotherapy such as nausea, loss of appetite, fatigue, diarrhoea, constipation and more...

Who should I contact?
If at any time during your course of chemotherapy treatment you become unwell you must contact one of the numbers below:

Chemotherapy Suite (Mon - Fri 8am - 6pm) for:
Treatment Related Enquiries: 01923 844527
Reception for all other Enquiries:..... 01923 844639
Marie Curie Ward: 01923 844225
Mon 7.30am to Fri 8.00pm
Ward 10: 01923 844042
24 hour cover (Mon-Sun)
Ward 11: 01923 844043
24 hour cover (Mon-Sun)
Pharmacy:..... 01923 844443
Mon - Fri: 9am - 5pm & Sat: 9.30am - 12 noon
Dietician: 01923 844366
Mon - Fri: 8.30am - 4.30pm

Out of hours (5.30pm - 8.30am) or anytime you are having difficulty reaching a health care professional on the above number, you may also call the **Senior Nurse on 01923 826111 and ask for bleep 6113.**

This leaflet forms part of a series of publications produced by the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC).

If you would like further information about any aspect of cancer and its treatments, please drop in to the centre or call the Helpline.

The LJMC is staffed by healthcare professionals and trained volunteers and is part of the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

- Drop-in centre for support and information
- Telephone Helpline
- Benefits Advice *
- Pre-treatment visits*
- Complementary therapies *
- Relaxation classes
- Counselling *
- Support groups
- Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops

* These services are available to patients under the care of an NHS oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

Opening hours: Mon - Fri: 9.30am - 1.00pm & 2.00 - 4.30pm

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre

situated between the Cancer Centre and Gate 3 (White Hill)

Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2RN

Telephone Helpline: **01923 844014**

www.ljmc.org

