

Febrile Neutropenia Patient Information Sheet

What Does Febrile Mean?

- The word febrile means you have a fever.
- A fever is defined as a single oral temperature of greater than or equal to 38.3°C (101 F), or a temperature of greater than 38.0°C (101.4 F) lasting at least an hour.
NOTE: Patient may not present with fever, but may have symptoms such as hypotension, tachycardia or chills.
* Ensure that you have an accurate, reliable thermometer to check your temperature when feeling unwell.

What Is Neutropenia?

When you have Neutropenia, you have a Low White Blood Cell (WBC) Count.

White Blood Cells (WBC)

There are three main types of cells in your blood: white cells, red cells and platelets. White blood cells help your body fight infections. When there are not enough white cells in the blood, you can get an infection more easily. You need to take special precautions to avoid infections when your white blood cell count is low.

How do I know if my body's white blood cell count is low?

The only way to know for sure, that there is a low number of WBCs in your body, is to have a blood sample taken and tested in the Lab. The Registered Lab Technologist will count the number of WBCs in your blood sample. This is called your 'white blood cell count'.

Usually your WBC count is 4.0 or higher. During your chemotherapy schedule, it often drops lower (1.5 - 2.0) without serious harm. To learn when to expect your WBC count to be low, ask your Oncology Clinic nurse, doctor or pharmacist.

You may have one or more of these warning signs of infection:

- Fever (temperature over 100°F or 38°C) *Keep a thermometer at home.
- Chills or shaking
- Unusual sweating
- Burning feeling when passing urine; more frequent urination
- Redness, heat, swelling or drainage from a wound
- Cough with yellow or green sputum
- Sore throat (with fever)
- Diarrhea (with fever)

What should I do if I have any of these signs?

Sometimes it is hard to tell if you have an infection. However, if you have any warning signs and your WBC count may be low, ***this is a medical emergency.***

****Even if you feel fairly well, you must contact your doctor or nurse immediately OR go to your nearest hospital Emergency Room. ****

What to do when your WBC count is low:

- ✓ Take your temperature daily by mouth when your WBC count is likely to be low, or if you have chills, sweats or feel feverish.
- ✓ Stay away from large crowds or people who have flu, colds or contagious diseases.
- ✓ Eat well-balanced meals. Wash all fruits and vegetables. Avoid raw meat or fish.
- ✓ Drink at least 8 glasses of fluid a day (most of them without caffeine).
- ✓ Keep your hands away from your mouth.
- ✓ Do regular mouth care 3-4 times a day to help prevent mouth sores.
- ✓ Shower or bathe daily if able.
- ✓ Wash your hands well before eating and after using the toilet.
- ✓ Clean any scrape or cut immediately with soap and warm water. Cover with a bandage to protect from infection.
- ✓ Prevent constipation. If you need a laxative, ask your nurse, doctor or pharmacist for help.
- ✓ Remember that some medications (examples: steroids, acetaminophen) can hide an infection by reducing fever. Pay close attention to any signs of infection when taking these drugs along with chemotherapy.

What *NOT* to do when your WBC is low:

- ✓ Avoid rectal suppositories or enemas.
- ✓ Do not work in the garden without wearing gloves.
- ✓ Do not share drinking glasses or eating utensils.
- ✓ Do not touch animal droppings, or clean litter boxes or birdcages. (If you must clean up after an animal, wear protective gloves.)

GREY BRUCE HEALTH NETWORK

Preventive Management:

1. The most important way to prevent infection is by thorough hand washing.
2. Avoid persons with colds or infections. Explain to them that you are more susceptible to infection.
3. Any cut, scratch or non-healed area should be inspected, cleaned and have a new dressing applied at least once a day. Show any of these areas to the nurse or physician on your next visit.
4. Eat Well:
 - Eating a healthy diet based on Canada's Food Guide helps prevent infections, reduces illness and cuts down on hospital admissions.
 - Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.
 - Wash raw fruits and vegetables well.
 - Cook eggs and meats thoroughly.
 - For more information, you can speak to a dietitian. Ask your nurse or doctor to arrange an appointment.
5. Clean your mouth several times a day. Report any white patches, ulcers or sore areas to a member of the Health Care Team.

Carry your Fever Alert Card with you at all times

Adapted with permission from the Royal Victoria Hospital "Febrile Neutropenia Patient Handout", 2002 and "Low White Blood Cells" handout from the Hamilton Regional Cancer Centre, 1996