

# **Frequently asked Questions by Patients and Their Families**

## ***WILL I GET SICK?***

Today, we have powerful medicines for nausea that work so well many people have no difficulties with nausea or vomiting. You will be given anti-nausea medicine before your chemotherapy treatment and you will be instructed for home use.

## ***WILL I LOSE MY HAIR?***

Hair loss depends on the type of chemotherapy you receive. If your treatment has the potential to cause hair loss the doctors and nurses will advise you of this. We can recommend various businesses in town that deal with wigs and their care.

## ***WHAT SIDE EFFECTS WILL I HAVE FROM MY CHEMOTHERAPY?***

Each chemotherapy treatment has different side effects and you will be taught the main problems to watch for. Chemotherapy has changed over the years and many of the severe problems that it caused are now much more manageable. We will give you a calendar book and symptom management information to help you. The doctors and nurses will work with you to help make your chemotherapy experience the best one possible. We encourage you to call the staff with any concerns.

## ***WHEN SHOULD I CALL THE DOCTOR?***

Anytime you feel ill or just have a question you are encouraged to call the office and speak with the nurses. They relay your concerns to either Dr. Matthews or Dr. Bettag. Our philosophy on patient care is to help someone with a concern while it is a small problem. It is easier for us to help you “sooner than later”, so we encourage you to call early. Examples of problems to call for are pain, fevers, chills, areas of redness or sites of swelling.

Please call ahead if you feel the need to come to the office for care when not scheduled. This allows us to plan for your needs and facilitate your care. The nurses will usually ask to speak directly with the patient when you call with a problem.

If you become ill when the office is closed, the nurses will show you how to reach your doctor when necessary. The after hours phone number (877) 470-7745, is on every appointment card.

### ***CAN I SEE THE DOCTOR IF I AM SUDDENLY SICK?***

Yes. If you suddenly have a problem and are not feeling well, call the office first. The nurses will ask you questions and help arrange for a visit with either the doctor or the nurse practitioner. If you are urgently ill, you may be directed to the Emergency Room of your choice. Your care may be delayed if you come in without calling first.

### ***WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I HAVE A FEVER?***

If you feel that you have a fever, take your temperature. Patients on chemotherapy need to watch for signs of infection. Fevers are important clues for the doctor and nurses. Call the office and update the nursing staff on your symptoms. They will help advise you of what to do. If you develop a fever on the weekend or when the office is closed, call the after-hours phone number to speak with a physician for instructions or go to the emergency room.

### ***CAN I CHANGE MY APPOINTMENTS OR BLOOD TESTS?***

Chemotherapy is given on a schedule. The scheduled appointments and blood tests are important for monitoring your care. It is recommended that you stick to the dates you are scheduled for. Review your schedule when you get your treatment and ask for adjustments if needed. If you need to change or cancel appointments, please call the office and speak with the nurses.

### ***CAN I GO TO THE DENTIST?***

When you are on chemotherapy you can go to the dentist but it is important to coordinate the visit with your chemotherapy schedule. There may be certain days in your cycles that you should not have any invasive procedures done. Let the nurses know if and when you want to make an appointment with the dentist so they can confer with the doctor and guide your decision.

## ***CAN I GO TO A TANNING BOOTH OR CAN I BE OUT IN THE SUN?***

Patients need to be very careful about sun exposure while receiving chemotherapy. Chemotherapy makes your skin more sensitive to the sun and you can experience significant sunburns. Tanning booths are not allowed while on treatment.

## ***CAN I EXERCISE?***

Yes, but cancer treatments, including chemotherapy, cause fatigue. You need to exercise in moderation. A daily walk is a terrific form of exercise but you will need to listen to your body. It will tell you when you need to rest and when your energy level is good. You may need to prioritize your activities. Exercise is often helpful in reducing fatigue from treatment. Remember that moderation is the key.

## ***CAN I DRINK ALCOHOL?***

Talk to your doctor about having a cocktail. Most of the time alcohol is permitted if taken in moderation. Many patients note that their sense of taste can change when on treatment and alcohol may not appeal. Alcohol is NOT permitted on the days of treatment or for 24 hours after chemotherapy.

## ***WHAT SHOULD I DO***

### ***IF MY FAMILY OR FRIENDS GET SICK?***

Handwashing is the best way to protect yourself from infections and viruses. Call the office to speak with the chemotherapy nurses when family issues of illness arise.

## ***MAY I GO ON VACATION?***

Yes. Discuss the exact dates with your doctor at your appointment. Trips and vacations are very important and we work hard to fit them into your chemotherapy schedule. If you need blood work while you are out of town, the nurses will assist you in making the arrangements.

## ***CAN MY FAMILY CALL FOR INFORMATION ABOUT ME?***

Family members or friends can NOT obtain any information about you or your health without your written consent. In 2003, new privacy laws (HIPAA) came into affect and these rules restrict the disclosure of any patient information without the patient's written consent. When you are seen at the office, the nurses will talk with you about gaining your written permission to discuss your health affairs with the people of your choice.

No questions are too small or trivial.

We would like to emphasize the importance of communicating with the office when there are questions. Families may call when they have concerns about a family member but due to new privacy laws, the patient must give written permission for us to discuss their care with family members.

To reach either Dr. Matthews or Dr. Bettag call:

(920) 458-7433 - Office

(877) 470-7745 - Answering service. Use this number after hours or on the weekend. The on call physician will assist you.

## **HOME SAFETY FOR PATIENTS RECEIVING CHEMOTHERAPY**

By: OncoLink.org

### ***HANDLING BODY WASTE***

Chemotherapy medication is released from the body through urine, stool, vomit and blood **for 48 hours after** your treatment has stopped. The guidelines listed below should be followed during that time:

- After using the toilet, close the lid and flush twice. Men should urinate sitting down to avoid splashing.
- After using the toilet, wash your hands well with soap and water. If any fluids splashed on your skin, clean the area with soap and water.

- Wear gloves when cleaning the toilet or cleaning up any urine, stool or vomit or changing diapers / incontinence pads. Wash your hands with the gloves on, then remove the gloves, dispose of them in the trash, and wash your hands again.
- If using a bedpan or urinal, wear gloves and dump contents into toilet close to the water to limit splashing. While wearing the gloves, wash the container with soap and water after each use.
- Diapers can be disposed of in the regular trash.
- If you have an ostomy, wear gloves when emptying and wash the collection bag once a day with soap and water.

## ***HANDLING TRASH OR LAUNDRY***

When handling trash or laundry that has come in contact with chemotherapy or body fluids within 48 hours after treatment:

- Wear gloves to handle contaminated trash or laundry. Wash your hands before and after removing the gloves.
- Contaminated trash can be placed in special bags if you were supplied with these or doubled bagged in a plastic, leak proof bags.
- If possible, wash contaminated laundry right away. If you cannot wash it right away, place in a leak proof plastic bag and wash as soon as possible.
- Wash contaminated laundry separate from other laundry, using regular laundry detergent and warm or hot water.

## ***HANDLING SPILLS***

If chemotherapy or body fluids (within 48 hours after treatment) are spilled or splashed:

- Wear gloves to clean up the spill/splash.
- Wipe up the spill with paper towels.
- Clean the area with soap and water and rinse using paper towels.
- Dispose of trash in specially marker containers (if you were provided with them) or double bag in leak proof plastic bags.
- Wash hands before and after removing gloves.

## ***SEXUAL CONTACT***

Chemotherapy medications can also be excreted in body fluids, such as semen and vaginal fluid. To prevent exposure of these fluids for you or your partner:

- Use condoms during oral sex and intercourse for 48 hours after treatment.
- Effective birth control should be used throughout treatment to prevent pregnancy while on these medications and for several months or years after therapy. Chemotherapy can have harmful side effects to the fetus, especially in the first trimester. In addition, menstrual cycles can become irregular during and after treatment, so you may not know if you are at a time in your cycle when you could become pregnant or if you are actually pregnant.

## ***SAFETY FOR MY FAMILY***

- Hugging and kissing is safe for you and your partner or family members.
- You can visit, sit with, hug and kiss the children in your life.
- You can be around pregnant women, though (if possible) they should not clean up any of your body fluids after you have treatment.
- You can share a bathroom with others. If body fluids splash on the toilet, wear gloves and clean the area with soap and water before others use the toilet.

## **NEUTROPENIA**

### **Low White Blood Cell Count**

#### ***WHAT IS NEUTROPENIA?***

White blood cells aid our bodies in fighting infections. Neutrophils are one of five types of white blood cells. Of the five types of white blood cells, neutrophils are the most important for fighting infections. A normal white blood cell count is 3,500-10,000. A normal neutrophil count (ANC) is 1,600-7000. A low neutrophil count is called neutropenia. If the neutrophil count is less than 1,000, there is an increased risk for infection.

## ***WHAT CAUSES NEUTROPENIA?***

Neutropenia can be caused by chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or your disease. You need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of infection when you have a low white blood cell count.

## ***PREVENTION?***

You may receive growth factors which tell your bone marrow to produce more white blood cells.

## ***SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INFECTIONS***

- Fever, temperature of 101°F or 38.3°C. Take your temperature in the morning and in the evening if your neutrophil count is decreased.
- Shaking Chills
- Chest congestion/cold symptoms
- Sores in mouth
- Sinus tenderness
- Frequency, burning, or urgency with urination
- Inflamed hemorrhoids
- Pimples or boils on the skin (may appear without pus, because white blood cells are needed to make pus)
- If you have a venous access device (i.e., Hickman, Broviac, Cook, Groshong, or Port) report any swelling, redness, tenderness at catheter site or along tunnel area or draining from exit site.
- A sudden and noticeable decline or change in your condition
- **CALL YOUR DOCTOR IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE ANY OF THESE SIGNS OR SYMPTOMS!**

**If your nurse/doctor tells you, “you are neutropenic” follow these guidelines**

## ***WHAT TO DO TO DECREASE THE RISK OF INFECTION***

- Wash hands frequently, especially before food preparation and after using the bathroom. This is the most effective way of

preventing the transmission of infection.

- Perform good mouth care frequently with a soft bristle toothbrush. If you wear dentures, clean twice a day.
- Keep skin dry and clean, especially underarms, groin and rectal areas.
- Do not eat foods that may contain bacteria. These are fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, and black pepper. You may need to make adjustments in your diet **when** you are neutropenic.
- Avoid people with infections such as colds, flu, and chicken pox.
- Avoid large crowds, such as at shopping malls.
- Do not smoke and avoid people who smoke.
- Do not use rectal suppositories unless your doctor agrees.
- Avoid cleaning bird cages, fish tanks, or cat litter boxes.
- In some situations you may need to wear a mask; talk with your doctor.

## ***HOW INFECTIONS ARE TREATED***

Antibiotics may be prescribed to be taken by mouth. Also you could be told to come into the hospital for intravenous (IV) antibiotics.

# **ANEMIA**

## ***WHAT IS ANEMIA?***

The word anemia is used when the red blood cell count is low. Red blood cells are produced in the bone marrow. They carry oxygen all over the body. When you are anemic, the body tissues do not get enough oxygen to do their work.

Anemia is determined by blood tests called hematocrit (HCT) and hemoglobin (Hgb).

- A normal hematocrit for men is 40-50%, and for women is 35-40%.
- A normal hemoglobin for men is 12.8-17.4, and for women is 11.8-15.4.



## ***WHAT CAUSES ANEMIA?***

The cause of anemia varies. Some causes are too little iron, too much blood loss, cancer, genetic disorders, and medications (especially chemotherapy).

## ***WHAT ARE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ANEMIA?***

- Fatigue
- Pale skin
- Light-headedness
- Nausea
- Shortness of breath
- Ringing in the ears
- Pounding heart rate

## ***HOW IS ANEMIA TREATED?***

Sometimes medications are used. Iron supplements or vitamins may be used. Blood transfusions may be needed. You may receive a growth factor which tells your bone marrow to produce more red blood cells.

## ***WAYS TO REDUCE SYMPTOMS***

- Plan frequent, short rest periods.
- Sit up slowly from lying to sitting.
- Sit awhile before standing.
- Stand awhile before walking.
- Dress warmly.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and drink lots of fluids.

## ***WHEN TO CALL YOUR DOCTOR***

Call your doctor if you have light-headedness, shortness of breath, pounding heart, or chest pain.

Please feel free to call the office with any questions or concerns about these guidelines.

# **THROMBOCYTOPENIA**

## ***WHAT IS THROMBOCYTOPENIA?***

The word thrombocytopenia is used when the platelet count is below 100,000. Normal platelet count is 140,000-380,000. Platelets (Plts) aid our bodies in blood clotting and to prevent bleeding.

## ***WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF THROMBOCYTOPENIA?***

Symptoms of thrombocytopenia may not appear unless the platelet count is very low (i.e., less than 20,000).

Early Signs:

- Bruising
- Bleeding/oozing gums
- Petechiae (little red spots under the skin-like freckles)
- Black tarry stools

Later Signs:

- Blood in urine (cloudy pink to red)
- Nose bleeds

## ***WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE THROMBOCYTOPENIA***

- Use a soft toothbrush.
- Do not use dental floss.
- Use electric razor for shaving instead of blades.
- Avoid blowing nose vigorously.
- Use a sonic humidifier or saline nasal spray to keep nose moist.
- Avoid constipation. Use stool softeners, high fiber diets, and plenty of fluids.
- Avoid aspirin or aspirin-containing products.
- Avoid Ibuprofen or Ibuprofen-containing products or similar drugs unless approved by your doctor.

- Use Tylenol for minor pain.
- Avoid activities which carry risk of injury (i.e., contact sports).
- Apply pressure to blood drawing sites for several minutes after blood is drawn.

## ***SEXUAL GUIDELINES***

- If your platelet count is less than 100,000, please consult your physician or nurse regarding the advisability of engaging in sexual intercourse.
- Use of water-soluble lubricants are recommended to avoid vaginal or penile trauma. Surgi-lube is an example of water-soluble lubricant.

## ***HOW THROMBOCYTOPENIA IS TREATED***

Sometimes medications are used. Frequently platelet (blood) transfusions are given if symptoms occur and/or platelet count is less than 20,000. You may receive a growth factor that tells your bone marrow to make more platelets.

## ***WHEN TO CALL YOUR DOCTOR***

Any early or late signs of bleeding (as above).

## **NAUSEA AND VOMITING**

Nausea and vomiting are common side effects that most people associate with chemotherapy and that most dread having. The frequency of this problem has decreased significantly over the past years due to the development of new “anti-nausea” medicines that have high levels of effectiveness. Still, we worry about nausea and vomiting because it can disrupt your nutritional intake and fluid status which ultimately affects how they deal with their cancer treatment. The following guidelines contain some hints and information to help you deal with these side effects if they should develop. Make sure to call the office if you have difficulty dealing with these symptoms.

## ***AFTER YOUR TREATMENT***

- Use your “anti-nausea” medicine as necessary. You may or

may not need to take it in the morning after your treatment. If your stomach feels upset then take some medication. If you feel fine then you don't need to take anything.

- Eat a light meal. Avoid large, heavy meals since they tend to nauseate people after treatment. Drink fluids after you eat your meal.
- Avoid fried, fatty or spicy foods after treatment.
- No alcohol.

## **NAUSEA AND VOMITING**

- If you feel nauseated, take your "anti-nausea" medicine and wait awhile until your stomach feels settled.
- Eat small frequent meals throughout the day.
- Take liquids at least one hour before or after eating.
- Eat foods at room temperature.
- Eat slowly and chew your food well. This makes the food easier to digest. Drink liquids through a straw.
- Dry foods such as toast, crackers, dry cereal help settle nausea especially in the morning.
- Cool, clear fluids-cold water, apple juice, ginger ale, cola (flat) and popsicles are usually tolerated better when you're feeling sick.
- If odors bother you, prepare food ahead of time and freeze them. This helps avoid the cooking odors.
- Avoid lying flat for at least two hours after eating.
- Avoid food, smoke, perfume or other odors that disturb you.
- Breathe slowly through your mouth.
- Try to sleep during the period you are most likely to be nauseated.
- If you have persistent vomiting, call the office. Stop any liquid intake for at least an hour. Start to drink again but only in small amounts like an ounce or two at a time. If you are able to keep the fluids down, then start to drink more at a time. People can become dehydrated after excessive vomiting. Watch for dizziness or a lightheaded feeling when changing

positions from lying to sitting or sitting to standing. Your urine output may decrease and your mouth may feel very dry. Try to push your fluid intake if you have any of these symptoms. One of the best fluids to drink when vomiting is Gatorade. It is absorbed quickly and contains many salts you need in your body. If these symptoms develop, be sure to call.

A healthy diet and good fluid intake help the body heal itself and are very important when you are on chemotherapy. Not all cancer treatments cause nausea and vomiting, and everyone handles these problems differently. Our goal is the same for everyone: minimal discomfort from these side effects and knowing what to do if they should arise.

Please feel free to call the office with any questions or concerns about these guidelines.

## **MOUTH SORES & SORE THROATS**

It is not uncommon for people receiving chemotherapy to develop a sore throat or mouth sores. These areas are often the sites of side effects due to the rapid growth of the cells lining the mouth, throat or stomach. It is especially important to take good care of your mouth and throat while on chemotherapy by eating well and drinking fluids. The following contains some guidelines for good oral health and information to cope with sores if they should develop. Make sure to tell the nurses if you have these side effects.

### ***MOUTH SORES***

Mouth sores are painful white areas in your mouth that resemble canker sores. They can sometimes interfere with eating and drinking. If you should develop sores the following information should help.

- Rinse your mouth frequently with 1/2 strength peroxide and water. The peroxide helps to oxygenate the tissues by its foaming action. • Avoid foods or liquids that are highly acidic, such as tomatoes, grapefruit or oranges.
- Avoid spicy foods or foods that are crunchy and difficult to chew such as popcorn, peanuts.

- No cigarettes or alcohol.
- Brush with a soft toothbrush and try to clean your mouth frequently, especially after meals. Use a fluoride gel to prevent tooth decay. No flossing when the mucosa is irritated.
- There are special medicines that can help relieve the soreness for a short while. If your sores interfere with drinking and eating, tell the doctor to see if they can prescribe something for you.
- Avoid commercial mouthwashes. These often contain alcohol or salt that can be very irritating to a sore mouth. Make your own rinse using one teaspoon of baking soda and or salt with one quart of warm water. Rinse with this solution in your mouth for one minute.
- Use lip balm to keep your lips moist.

## ***SORE THROAT***

If your throat becomes dry and sore, you need to adjust your eating habits to make swallowing easier.

- Eat soft foods such as eggs, yogurt, pudding, mashed potatoes, cottage cheese, milk shakes, baby food, jello.
- Use butter, gravy or sauces on foods.
- Soften foods by dunking them in a beverage first.
- Use a blender to puree food to make it easier to swallow.
- Using a straw can sometimes make swallowing easier.

It is important to let us know if you are having difficulty eating or swallowing.

By eating a healthy diet, avoiding any increased irritation of your mouth and watching for signs of infection, the patient on chemotherapy should be able to decrease the potential for mouth sores.

Please feel free to call the office with any questions or concerns about these guidelines.

# **CONSTIPATION**

Constipation is a frequent problem when taking narcotics. Pain medications tend to slow down the bowels so the stool gets hard and doesn't pass as quickly as usual. This can lead to a feeling of fullness and abdominal discomfort. Diet, fluids, exercise and regular bowel habits can help deter this potential problem. Very frequently the doctors will start you on a stool softener with your pain medication. Other measures may help as well:

## ***WHAT TO DO***

- Eat foods high in fiber or roughage.
  - Raw fruit-apples, pears, grapes, plums, peaches
  - cooked or stewed fruit-applesauce, prunes, figs
  - Raw vegetables-carrots, celery, tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, spinach
  - Cooked or stewed vegetables-baked potatoes, broccoli, green beans
  - Whole grain breads and cereals
  - Daily bran adds bulk and stimulates bowel movements.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Eight to ten 8 oz. glasses of fluid daily.
- Exercise as much as your pain allows. Activity stimulates regular movements and maintains muscle tone you need.
- Eat foods that helped you "go" in the past.
- Try to use the toilet or commode even if it is the only time you get out of bed.
- Set aside 10-15 minutes for sitting on the commode, preferably after a meal. Drink a hot drink about 1/2 hour before your planned time.
- Don't ignore the urge to "go". Delaying a bowel movement may actually help cause constipation.

## ***WHEN TO CALL***

Call if constipation becomes severe or causes abdominal pain, cramping or bloating. Call if you pass blood in your stools. Call for nausea or vomiting.

Please feel free to call the office with any questions or concerns.

# **DIARRHEA**

Diarrhea is a problem often associated with chemotherapy due to the effects of these medications on the lining of the GI tract (bowels). When there is GI tract irritation, people can experience the symptoms of cramping and frequent loose stools. It is very important to learn how to manage these symptoms because diarrhea can limit the ability of your GI tract to absorb food and nutrients which can then alter your ability to heal. The following guidelines contain some information and hints to help deal with these symptoms.

If you have questions or are unsure of what to do, please call the office.

## ***WHAT TO DO***

- Eat small frequent meals instead of large meals. This is less irritating to the GI tract.
- Avoid milk products when having loose stools, i.e. milk, cream soups, ice cream.
- Serve foods and liquids at room temperature.
- Avoid coffee and alcohol. No carbonated beverages.
- Avoid spicy, fried or fatty foods.
- Always increase fluid intake to make up for the fluids lost from the diarrhea. Bouillon, Koolaid, Gatorade, flat soda and jello are all good fluids to take when having diarrhea.
- No chocolate or licorice.
- You may need to implement the use of an antidiarrheal medication. Call the office to find out the type of medicine to use. Continue to watch your bowel habits while on medication. It can sometimes lead to constipation.
- Use sitz baths or frequent cleansing for rectal discomfort. Tucks pads are also good for burning sensations. Desitin or A&D ointment can also be used. Unscented baby wipes can be helpful and soothing to help clean up after each bowel movement.



Persistent diarrhea can lead to dehydration and a disruption of the body's ability to absorb nutrients essential for healing. Dietary changes can usually alleviate most symptoms but if the symptoms you have don't appear to be decreasing, make sure to call.

## ***WHEN TO CALL***

Any diarrhea symptoms that persist for 24 hours and are not relieved by routine interventions. Make a note of how many stools per day you are having and the consistency of the diarrhea. Call if you are experiencing severe or persistent abdominal pain. Call if you pass any blood.

Please feel free to the office with any questions or concerns about these guidelines.

## **PAIN**

Some people with cancer experience pain. The treatments for cancer related pain vary widely from relaxation techniques to pain medication to surgery. If you are experiencing pain you need to discuss your pain with the doctors to help review the type of pain you have, its location and the best treatment for it. The following guidelines deal with pain medication, side effects and how to deal with these side effects.

## ***PAIN MEDICATION***

There are a variety of pain medications available today ranging from Tylenol to Morphine. The type of medication you take depends on the type of pain you have and the severity of your pain.

When people are experiencing pain the doctor may prescribe a narcotic medication. Narcotics were designed for moderate to severe pain and are often used for cancer pain. They are very effective for controlling pain although some people are afraid to use them. A common fear many people have when taking pain medication is that they will become addicted to the medication. This is an unnecessary worry. The chance of addiction is essentially absent for people using medication for cancer pain. The most important goal of pain treatment is to always use

enough pain medicine to obtain an acceptable level of comfort with minimal side effects.

## ***SIDE EFFECTS***

Although not everyone has side effects from narcotics, some of the more common ones are: constipation, drowsiness, dry mouth, nausea or confusion. The most troublesome problems are constipation and less frequently, drowsiness.

Please see the information regarding management of constipation.

You may experience some drowsiness initially when taking your medicine and usually this goes away in a few days. If drowsiness is severe or persistent, call the office. Check the amount of medication prescribed. If there is any question, please call. **BE CAREFUL** to avoid situations in which you might hurt yourself as a result of not being alert, such as climbing stairs, cooking or driving a car. Do not use alcohol while taking narcotics. Call the office if you are experiencing any problems with confusion or unclear thinking.

Nausea from your pain medication is usually easy to control but you must inform your doctor if you are experiencing nausea, vomiting, or loss of appetite. Gum, hard candy or lemon drops are often helpful for a dry mouth.

Our goal is to help you maintain your lifestyle by eliminating pain while using pain medication and limiting the side effects. Please feel free to call the office with any questions or concerns about your pain or its treatment.



