

Infection

An infection is the invasion and growth of germs in the body, such as bacteria, viruses, yeast, or other fungi. An infection can begin anywhere in the body, may spread throughout the body, and can cause one or more signs.

Call right away if you have:

- Fever that is 100.5°F (38°C) or higher.
Ask how many times a day you should take your temperature.
- Chills
- Cough or sore throat
- Ear pain
- Headache or bad sinus pain
- Stiff or sore neck
- Skin rash
- Sores or white coating in your mouth or on your tongue
- Swelling or redness anywhere. Watch for swelling or soreness if you have a catheter.
- Bloody or cloudy urine
- Pain or burning when you urinate
- Other: _____

(Ask your nurse about other signs of infection to call about.)

The importance of contacting your health care team

Call your health care team if you have signs of an infection. Infections during cancer treatment can be life threatening and require urgent medical attention. Be sure to talk with your doctor or nurse before taking medicine—even aspirin, acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®), or ibuprofen (such as Advil®) for a fever. These medicines can lower a fever but may also mask or hide signs of a more serious problem.

Some types of cancer and treatments such as chemotherapy may increase your risk of infection. This is because they lower the number of white blood cells, the cells that help your body to fight infection. During chemotherapy, there will be times in your treatment cycle when the number of white blood cells (called neutrophils) is particularly low and you are at increased risk of infection. Stress, poor nutrition, and not enough sleep can also weaken the immune system, making infection more likely.

You will have blood tests to check for neutropenia (a condition in which there is a low number of neutrophils). Medicine may sometimes be given to help prevent infection or to increase the number of white blood cells.



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Ways to prevent infection

Wash your hands well

Always wash your hands:

- Before you cook or eat
 - After you use the bathroom
 - After being in a public place
- Wash your hands well with soap and water. Have people around you wash their hands well, too.
 - Check with your doctor or nurse about when to use hand sanitizer.

Stay extra clean

- Brush your teeth after meals and before you go to bed. Use a very soft toothbrush.
- If you have a catheter, keep the area around it clean and dry. Learn from your nurse how to take care of this area.

Try to stay away from germs

- Stay away from people who are sick or have a cold. Try to stay away from big crowds if you can.
- Wash raw fruits and vegetables very well.
- Wash your hands carefully after you handle raw meat. Cook meat well before eating it.
- Try to stay away from people who have just had a chicken pox, polio, or measles vaccine.
- Have someone else clean up after your pet.

Try not to get cuts

- Use an electric shaver, not a razor.
- Clean yourself well and gently after going to the bathroom. Let your nurse know if your rectal area is sore or bleeds.
- Don't squeeze pimples.

Questions to ask your doctor or nurse

Prepare for your visit by making a list of questions to ask. Consider adding these questions to your list:

- Am I at increased risk of infection during treatment? When am I at increased risk?
- What steps should I take to prevent infection?
- What signs of infection should I look for?
- Which signs signal that I need urgent medical care at the emergency room? Which should I call you about?

For more information and helpful videos, visit echoassociates.org/education

Source: National Cancer Institute

