

If you are undergoing chemotherapy, the treatment kills both the cancerous cells and the healthy cells in your body. The healthy or normal cells that are most likely to be destroyed by the chemotherapy are those that are growing at a fast rate.

You have three different kinds of blood cells: red blood cells (RBCs), white blood cells (WBCs) and platelets. This section discusses precautions to take when you may develop a low white blood count or low platelets, because low blood counts can put you at greater risk for infections.

Neutropenic Precautions

What does it mean to have an absolute neutrophil count (ANC) lower than 500?

The normal neutrophil (a type of WBC) count is 2,500 to 6,000. When you have 1,000 or fewer neutrophils, your risk for infection is increased. When your ANC is lower than 500, you are at risk for getting a serious infection. This condition is called “neutropenia.” If you are neutropenic and develop a fever or signs of infection, contact your doctor immediately. You may be given antibiotics to fight the infection.

The following list contains information to help you care for yourself while you are neutropenic:

- Check your temperature twice daily. Notify your nurse or doctor if you have a temperature above 100.4°F.
- Notify your doctor or nurse of any new redness, swelling, tenderness, drainage or odor on any part of your body, including your central line site.
- Shower or bathe daily.
- Perform mouth care every four hours, especially before and after meals.
- Wash your hands frequently. Many infections are transmitted through hands and things you touch. Washing your hands thoroughly is the most important thing you can do to prevent infection.
- Avoid having contact with crowds and people with active infections (like colds, flu and sore throats).
- Do not get manicures or pedicures.
- Use gloves when you do gardening.
- Avoid cleaning birdcages, cat litter boxes and fish tanks.
- Avoid hot tubs and Jacuzzis. Swim only in chlorinated swimming pools.
- If you cut or scrape your skin, wash it well with warm water and soap. Then apply a bandage.
- Use an electric shaver rather than a razor.

This information is based on recommendations from the National Institutes of Health.

(continued)

Platelet Precautions

Your blood counts, including platelets, will be monitored prior to each chemotherapy treatment and other times as ordered by your physician.

Platelets are the blood cells that enable your blood to clot. If your platelet count is low, you will be given specific guidelines on precautions that are applicable to your illness.

These guidelines may include the following:

- Be careful with physical activities that could cause injury or bruising.
- Discuss with your physician or nurse prior to using nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as Advil or Motrin products.
- Avoid the use of razors and hard toothbrushes (electric razors and soft-bristled toothbrushes are good options).
- Report unusual bruising, heavy nosebleeds, blood in urine or excessive menstrual bleeding.
- Notify your oncologist or nurse if you are scheduled for any invasive medical or dental procedure.

Anemia Precautions

Anemia is caused by low levels of red blood cells (RBCs) or hemoglobin (HGB), the part of the red blood cells that delivers oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. The normal HGB range is 13.0–17.0 gm/dL. Certain underlying conditions such as cancer, gastrointestinal tumors, hemorrhoids, surgery or other medical conditions increase the risk for developing anemia.

Anemia symptoms can develop slowly without affecting normal activities because the body adjusts to low oxygen levels; however, when anemia becomes more severe, the body can no longer compensate and symptoms may become noticeable.

Symptoms may include:

Feeling tired, weakness, fatigue, dizziness, pale skin, irritability, shortness of breath, a coldness in your hands or feet, brittle nails, headache, loss of concentration and developing palpitations (feeling of heart racing).

Severity of Anemia

Severity:	HGB Range:	Symptoms:
Mild	9.5–13.0	Often no signs or symptoms
Moderate	8.0–9.5	May present with symptoms
Severe	< 8.0	Symptoms usually present

Guidelines:

- Allow for adequate rest periods between activities; pace yourself.
- Get up slowly from a sitting or reclining position. This will lessen dizziness.
- Report persistent gasping, wheezing or difficulty breathing after doing strenuous work.
- Notify your physician or nurse if you experience unrelenting fatigue.