NEUTROPENIA
WHAT PATIENTS & CAREGIVERS NEED TO KNOW

LYMPHOMA CANADA

WHAT IS NEUTROPENIA?

White blood cell are the cells in your body that fight infections or germs. Neutrophils (new-tro-fils) are a type of white blood cell and the first line of defence when your body needs to fight an infection. Having too few neutrophils is called neutropenia.

It is common for patients with cancer, especially those receiving chemotherapy, to experience neutropenia. Your neutrophils can drop low and then return to a normal level without you ever developing an infection. However, neutropenia increases the risk of you developing an infection.

Neutropenia itself does not cause any symptoms. You may only realize that you have neutropenia when your doctor does a routine blood test or when an infection develops.

FEBRILE NEUTROPENIA

Neutropenia accompanied by fever and other signs of infection, is known as febrile neutropenia. The risk of fever and infection is higher for patients with cancer, especially if they are taking chemotherapy, so patients and their caregivers should monitor closely for them and report any symptoms to their health care team.

If you get a fever when you are neutropenic, it is very important to get immediate medical attention. It could be life-threatening and should be taken very seriously.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO REDUCE THE RISK OF FEBRILE NEUTROPENIA?

When your neutrophils are low, you have less ability to fight infections. Infections can make you very sick and may cause you to miss your next treatment. Sometimes you might need a lower dose of chemotherapy.

Changes or delays to your chemotherapy dose or schedule can impact the results of your treatment. In addition, if left untreated, febrile neutropenia can lead to serious infections, which may be life-threatening and/ or cause you to stay in the hospital. Therefore, it is important to take steps to prevent infection or to catch an infection early if it is developing.

Your healthcare team will check your white blood cell counts frequently. If your white blood cell counts are too low, they may recommend treatment.

TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR FEBRILE NEUTROPENIA

Sometimes patients with febrile neutropenia are prescribed antibiotics to help fight off any possible infections. Patients may also require routine injections of a drug that stimulates the growth and production of white blood cells and decreases the risk of febrile neutropenia.

To prevent or manage febrile neutropenia, your doctor may also prescribe treatment with a white blood cell growth factor, also known as a colony-stimulating factor (CSF). Growth factors are a medication that is given either

as a shot or into a vein through a needle. CSFs stimulate your bone marrow to make more white blood cells, boosting your neutrophil count and reducing the risk of infection and febrile neutropenia. These drugs are only used when necessary and are not used for all patients.

The most common side effects of growth factors are bone and muscle aches. This may be a dull ache or discomfort in the bones of the back, arms, legs or hips. This can often be relieved with acetaminophen (Tylenol). The pain or discomfort is usually mild and goes away once the injection or injections are completed.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INFECTION

Let your doctor and nurses know right away if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Fever over 38 degrees Celsius (fever is often the first sign of infection)
- Chills
- Sweating
- Flu-like symptoms such as body aches and extreme tiredness
- Cough or shortness of breath
- Sore throat or sores in your mouth
- Redness or swelling around sores on your skin or redness and swelling of your skin

You should take these symptoms very seriously, especially fever, and you should visit your local emergency room or contact your oncology team immediately.

PREVENTING INFECTION

- Wash your hands before and after using the bathroom.
- You can use a waterless cleaner if you do not have access to soap and water.
- Good mouth care is important. Brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush after eating and before bedtime.
- Take a warm shower every day. Hot showers may dry your skin. Pat your skin dry because rubbing it may also cause dryness.
- Try to stay away from people who are sick.
- If you are having problems with your teeth, be sure to check with your doctor first before seeing your dentist. Let your dentist know that you are receiving cancer treatment.
- Stay away from cleaning up after pets when they go to the bathroom (cats and dogs). This also includes cleaning fish tanks.

FOOD HANDLING

- Wash your hands and surfaces often with warm, soapy water.
- Cook food to the safe internal temperature.
- Separate your raw foods, such as meat and eggs, from cooked foods and vegetables.
- Refrigerate food and leftovers promptly at 4 degrees Celsius or below. Thaw frozen foods in the fridge.
- Avoid eating raw or undercooked meat, poultry, eggs, fish or seafood.
- Avoid deli meats, soft cheeses and unpasteurized dairy or juice.