

INFECTIONS AND STAYING WELL DURING TREATMENT

Cancer treatment can weaken your immune system, so you're more likely to pick up infections. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have to hide yourself away from the world, though. Just read up on the facts and take steps to protect yourself.

Why am I more likely to get an infection when I've had cancer treatment?

Chemotherapy and other treatments reduce your white blood cells, and these are the cells that fight off bacteria, viruses and infections. Even something like a cold, which you might normally shake off quickly, can be serious when your white blood cell count is low.

When am I most at risk?

A week or so after chemotherapy your white blood cell count is likely to be at its lowest. Your care team will tell you exactly when this is and can help you be extra careful.

What can I do to protect myself?

There are some things you can do to reduce the chance of picking up an illness:

- Wash your hands really well after using the loo, before cooking and eating, after handling a pet or housework, clearing up rubbish – or any other time you might have picked up germs
- Remind other people to wash their hands before touching you. That includes doctors and nurses!
- Have good personal hygiene. Lots of young people say having a bath and wash every day helps them feel better in themselves too
- Make sure your clothes, towels and bed linen are washed regularly
- Take care of your teeth and gum.
- Use a condom if you have sex. It will prevent infection, provide contraception and, if you're having chemotherapy, protect your partner from drugs that might be in your system
- Stay away from people who have colds or tummy bugs, including friends, family and children
- Avoid crowded places. Good news: you can stay away from lectures and work. Not so good news: you need to stay clear of concerts, cinemas and swimming pools too.

How do I know if I have an infection?

Be aware of what might signal an infection by watching out for the things below. If you develop any of them, call the department or ward number you've been given right away so they can tell you what to do.

They won't mind at all. They'd rather talk to you and reassure you than you get ill because you're worried about making a fuss.

You might not have everything on the list when you have an infection – and you could have something that isn't on it. If you aren't sure what's going on, call your team anyway.

- Fever – call the number you've been given straight away if you get a fever, even if it's the middle of the night
- Shivering or sweating
- A cough that is new or getting worse
- Cold symptoms – like a sore throat, a stuffy nose
- Burning or pain when you pass urine, or in your genital area
- Diarrhoea and vomiting – your care team can tell whether this is from the side effects of treatment or an infection
- Bleeding mouth or gums
- Blood in your urine, or when you have a bowel movement
- Redness or soreness anywhere on your body, especially around the tubes doctors use to give you treatment
- Abdominal pain
- Stiff neck.

Take your temperature

Get a digital or ear thermometer and learn how to use it. You can ask your pharmacist or nurse to show you how. Your care team will explain when to get medical advice for a fever, and give you a phone number to call.

Are there any illnesses I really need to avoid?

It's especially important to avoid chickenpox, shingles and measles, if you can. If your immunisations aren't up to date, mention it to your care team so they can give you some advice about what you can do.

- **Chickenpox:** try to stay away from children with chickenpox and tell your doctor right away if you've been around someone who has had it.
- **Shingles:** sometimes shingles flares up years after you've had chickenpox because the virus can stay in your body. The main symptoms are pain and a rash, sometimes with a fever. Your doctor can give you medication to suppress the virus and manage the symptoms. If you've had shingles, it's common to get it again.
- **Measles:** you can catch measles if you've not had it before, or if you weren't vaccinated for it when you were little. Symptoms are similar to a cold, with a high fever, red and painful eyes, and a sore throat. You usually don't need specific medication to treat measles but if you get really ill from it, you might need to stay in hospital while you recover.

Why is it important to go to the dentist?

It's important to look after your teeth and mouth on treatment. If you haven't seen your dentist in a while, visit them before your cancer treatment starts. Or, if that's not possible, visit one as soon as you can after treatment has started.

Why is it important? Cancer treatments can damage the lining of your mouth and cause ulcers or sores – a perfect way for infections to get into your body. Your dentist can help you reduce the risk of getting sores, and help you look after your mouth, teeth and gums. In the meantime, make sure you:

- Clean your teeth gently and often – after every meal and before going to bed
- Use a toothbrush with extra-soft bristles
- Rinse your mouth with water often to keep it moist
- Ask your care team if you should use mouth wash and floss
- your teeth.

If you have painful teeth and gums, or a sore mouth, try:

- Eating cold drinks, ice lollies or ice cubes
- Avoiding crunchy, hard or spicy food and opt for soft food instead
- Aiming for medium temperature food that's not too hot
- Asking your doctor or nurse about painkillers or medication.

What else can I do to look after myself?

Food and drink

Good nutrition supports your immune system and helps you stay strong. But when you're completely turned off by food, craving junk or have a painful mouth, what can you do?

- Make the most of the times when you feel hungry. Small snacks and drinks during the day all make a difference
- Eat different types of food – mix it up with fruit, vegetables, carbohydrates, protein etc
- Drink plenty of fluids. This helps clear medication from your system and avoid bladder infections
- And if you still just need to eat pizza for a week then do it, and don't beat yourself up.

Now isn't the time to go mountain climbing

Dangerous activities are out – at least for now. You need to be extra careful to avoid injuries because of the changes that cancer or treatment can cause to your blood cells. A bump could leave you bruised and a cut might take longer to stop bleeding.

This does not mean you have to be wrapped in cotton wool. It's not the time to take risks but you can get on with your life and have fun.

Keep fit and stay safe

Having cancer treatment does not mean you have to give up sport and exercise but you might need to take a break from what you usually do. A contact sport like rugby, or swimming while you have a tube for treatment, are too much of a risk. But you could see this as a chance to try something new, anything from yoga to walking. It's only temporary until your doctor says it's okay.

Not usually into sport? Now is a good time to take up gentle exercise because of all the health and emotional benefits it provides. Regular exercise helps prevent all kinds of health problems, like diabetes and heart disease. Plus, it can lift your mood, help you cope with pain and feel less tired. Win-win.

Who are we?

CLIC Sargent is a charity dedicated to supporting young people like you. We help people with cancer aged 24 and under from diagnosis onwards. Our website has lots of advice and videos from other young people about how to look after yourself on treatment, including skincare, lifestyle habits, complementary therapies, your emotions and self-esteem. Visit clicsargent.org.uk to find out more.