

# Oncology Symptom: Low White Blood Cell Count

## What are white blood cells?

- White blood cells help fight off infection.
- White blood cells are made in the bone marrow and carried in the blood.

## Why is my white blood cell count low?

- Treatments can affect your bone marrow.
- White blood cell counts may drop 1 to 2 weeks after a person gets a treatment.

## What can happen if my white blood cell count is too low?

- Low white blood cell count puts you at risk for getting an infection.

## How will I know if I have an infection?

You may notice one or more of the following things:

- ✓ Fever above 100.5°F
- ✓ Shaking chills
- ✓ Severe cough with mucus
- ✓ Sore throat
- ✓ Burning or pain when passing urine
- ✓ Urine that is cloudy or has a bad odor
- ✓ Pus that is draining from an open cut or sore
- ✓ Redness, pain, swelling, or pus around an area where a tube goes into your body

## What should I do if I think I have an infection?

- **Tell your doctor or nurse right away.**

## What can I do to prevent an infection?

- Wash your hands with soap and water:
  - ✓ Before eating
  - ✓ After using the bathroom
  - ✓ After touching something dirty
- Stay away from anyone who has a cold or the flu.
- If your white blood cell count is below 1000, stay away from large crowds of people.
- To prevent cracks in the skin that can get infected, bathe with mild soap and use lotion.
- To prevent nicks and cuts that can get infected, use an electric razor.
- Wash any cracks or cuts in your skin with soap and water and cover them with a new Band-Aid every day.
- Only use deodorant. Do not use antiperspirant because it can block pores and can cause an infection.
- Stay away from all sources of water that have been sitting for a long time such as flower vases, denture cups, wash basins and soap dishes.
- Always wear shoes with hard soles to prevent breaks in your skin.
- Brush your teeth or dentures twice a day and rinse your mouth with salt water twice a day between brushings.
  - ✓ You can make salt water at home by mixing  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of table salt in 1 cup of water.
- Do not touch waste material from pets since it contains germs.
- Do not use a humidifier.
- Do not eat fresh, raw fruits and vegetables because they may contain germs.
- Do not do any gardening and do not touch soil, potted plants and flowers because they may contain germs.
- Wash hands before having sex. During sex, use a water-based gel for lubrication and avoid too much friction.
- Do not put anything in the rectum since it may damage the tissue and lead to an infection.
- Check yourself for infection every day. If you feel warm, take your temperature. Tell your doctor or nurse right away if it is higher than 100.5°F.
- Tell your dentist if you are getting chemotherapy.