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## Neutropenia

### A Young People and Parent's Guide

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## What is Neutropenia?

Neutropenia means a low number of neutrophils in the blood. Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell that help the body to fight infection. They work particularly against infections caused by bacteria and fungi. The only way to check the number of neutrophils in your blood is with blood tests and you may therefore need blood tests to monitor the level.

## What causes Neutropenia?

There are many different conditions and medications that can cause neutropenia. Some common causes are:

- Transient neutropenia – a short term fall in neutrophil numbers due to an infection. This will be monitored and should recover by itself.
- Chemotherapy – chemotherapy targets cells which are multiplying quickly. This includes some of the body's own cells such as neutrophils. The neutrophil count will recover in time after chemotherapy treatment.
- Bone marrow problems – neutrophils are made in the bone marrow on the inside of your bones. If you have a problem with the bone marrow, it may not be able to produce neutrophils as well as it otherwise would.

## What does Neutropenia mean for us?

There are no symptoms of neutropenia usually, although some people feel tired or have a sore mouth when their neutrophil count is at its lowest.

If you have a low number of neutrophils however, your body is not as good at fighting infection as it could be.

This means you are more likely to catch bacterial infections and are also at increased risk of an infection becoming serious. For this reason, treatment for infection will need to be started quickly and antibiotics will often need to be given into a vein.

It is important to have a reliable thermometer at home so that you can check your temperature if you feel unwell or feel hot/ cold.

## You must contact your specialist team or come to hospital immediately if:

- 1. You have a temperature of > 38oC or < 36oC**
- 2. You become unwell in any way, regardless of your temperature**
- 3. You have the rash or have been in contact with someone who then goes on to develop chicken pox or measles**

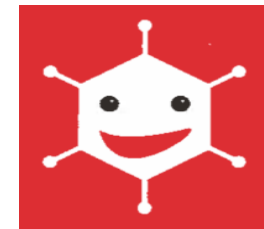
## What can we do to prevent infection?

Despite everyone's best efforts, people with significant neutropenia are likely to get an infection at some point. Things that you can do to help reduce the risk of infection whilst you are neutropenic are:

- Wash hands thoroughly after going to the toilet and before eating
- Avoiding contact with friends or relatives who are unwell
- Washing fruit and veg and making sure meat and fish are cooked thoroughly
- Avoiding cleaning up pets' poo, and be careful with handling plants and soil

You should always tell doctors and nurses that you are **neutropenic** in case they do not know.

Children with long standing neutropenia at the Whittington Hospital sometimes carry an alert card.



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