

# Going Home After Chemotherapy: What I Need to Know



Centre universitaire  
de santé McGill



McGill University  
Health Centre

**Office d'éducation des patients  
Patient Education Office**

# A patient-friendly booklet for:

This booklet is to help you manage symptoms and side-effects, prevent complications, and decide when to get help.

**This is a companion booklet to the Oncology Passport. Please bring this booklet and your Oncology Passport with you every time you come to the hospital.**



The creation of this booklet was coordinated by Nancy Lee Brown and Nicette Ramirez. It was written in collaboration with the nurses of 17 East, and edited by Louise Duguay.

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Fourth edition

## IMPORTANT : PLEASE READ

Information provided in this booklet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or guidance of a professional healthcare practitioner or as a substitute for medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.



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Booklet available through the MUHC Patient Education Office website:  
[www.muhcpatienteducation.ca](http://www.muhcpatienteducation.ca)

# When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?

## Infection and Neutropenia

- Fever (temperature) of either:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**
- You do not have a fever, but you have chills

## Fatigue

- Sudden, extreme fatigue with chest pain, palpitations (sensation of increased heartbeat), or both
- Difficulty breathing at rest

## Bleeding

- Nosebleeds not relieved by applying pressure for 10 minutes
- Vomiting blood
- Coughing blood
- For women, soaking one or more sanitary pads per hour

## Mouth Sores

- Unable to drink fluids, or take your medication, for 24 hours or more
- Fever (temperature) of either:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**

## Nausea and Vomiting

- You vomit many times, which stops you from eating or drinking
- You cannot keep foods and liquids down
- You are vomiting blood or black liquid
- You have intolerable stomach pain with vomiting
- You have an intolerable headache with vomiting
- You vomit for more than 24 hours

# When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?

## Constipation

- Sudden stomach pain, nausea, cramping, or bloating
- Loss of feeling in your rectal area
- Sudden loss of control of your bowels (stool is coming out and you cannot stop it)
- Bleeding from your rectum
- Fever (temperature) of either:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**

## Diarrhea

- More than 10 watery bowel movements per day
- Cramping, abdominal, or rectal pain with diarrhea
- Unable to drink any fluids
- Fever (temperature) of either:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**

## Anxiety

- You have frequent thoughts of dying, trying to kill yourself or hurting yourself or others
- Anxiety accompanied by trembling, tightness in your throat, or difficulty breathing

## Depression

- You have frequent thoughts of dying, trying to kill yourself or hurting yourself or others

Your cancer journey has begun. You will be receiving chemotherapy. It is normal to have questions about how you will feel with your treatments.

This booklet will give you tips about how to manage symptoms and side-effects at home. It will also help you decide when and whom to call for help, or when to come to the Emergency Department.

Please note, you may not have all of these symptoms or side effects. You may have different symptoms or side-effects than someone else. Some people have few or no side effects. You could experience less common symptoms not discussed here. Speak to your treatment team. They will be able to answer questions about your particular experiences.



**We wish you well as your journey continues . . .**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?	4
Chemotherapy (Chemo)	8
Blood Cells	10
Infection and Neutropenia	12
Special Situation: Pets	16
Fatigue	18
Bleeding	22
Mouth Sores	24
Nausea and Vomiting	27
Constipation	30
Diarrhea	32
Loss of Appetite	36
Coping with Cancer	38
Anxiety	40
Depression	44
Insomnia	46
Hair Loss	48
Sexual Health	52
Complementary and Alternative Therapies	56
Important Telephone Numbers	59
Acknowledgments	62
Resources	63
Notes	64
Help Us, Help Others	67

# Chemotherapy (Chemo)



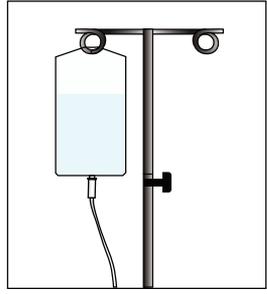
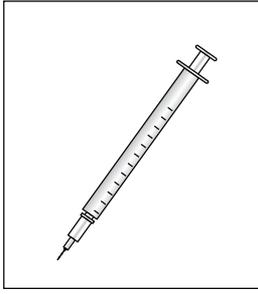
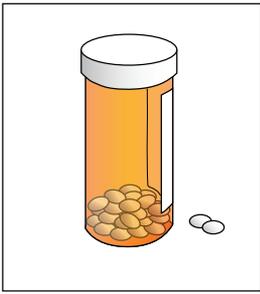
## What is this?

Chemotherapy (Chemo) is the use of powerful medications to kill cancer cells. How it is used depends on the type of cancer you have, your age, health, and how advanced your cancer is.

Chemo can be used:

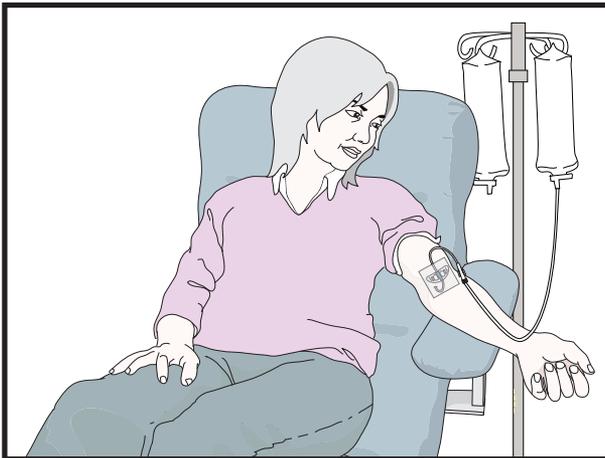
- To cure the cancer
- To treat cancer cells that might have broken off and travelled away from the original cancer
- To control the growth or spread of the cancer
- To manage symptoms from the cancer

Chemo is systemic. This means it goes everywhere in your body. It travels through your blood vessels. These are tubes in your body that move your blood. Chemo works by destroying fast-growing cells, such as cancer cells. It also damages healthy cells that grow fast, such as the cells making up your hair, bone marrow, the lining of your mouth, esophagus, stomach and intestines. The good news is that these cells usually get better once your chemo is done.



Chemo medications come in many different forms. It can be pills. It can be an injection. It can also be a liquid that is given through your vein (intravenous or IV).

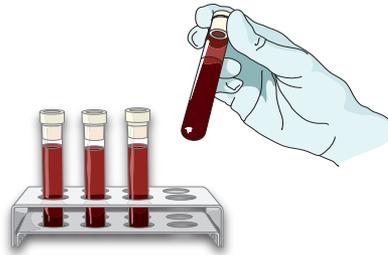
Some people receive one medication. Other people receive two or more. What you get is called your chemo protocol or regimen. Talk with your treatment team if you have questions or concerns.



# Blood Cells

## What are these?

There are three main types of cells in the blood: white blood cells, red blood cells, and platelets.



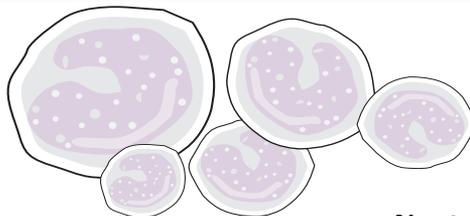
A CBC blood test (Complete Blood Count) shows the number of different cells in your blood. It is usually done before each chemo treatment, because chemo may lower the number of your blood cells. This happens most often 7-10 days after your chemo finishes.

1) **White blood cells** help your body fight to infection.

**Neutrophils** are the most important type of white blood cell that fight infection. Neutropenia is when your neutrophils are low after chemo. During this time, you can get an infection more easily. Your doctor or nurse may say that you are 'neutropenic'.

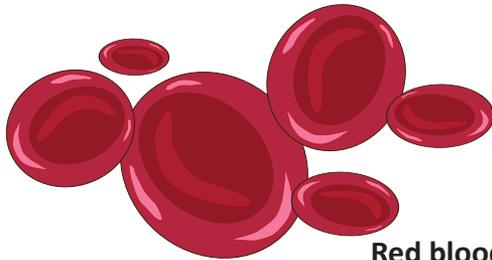


**An infection when you are neutropenic can be a life-threatening medical emergency.** See page 12, Infection and Neutropenia.



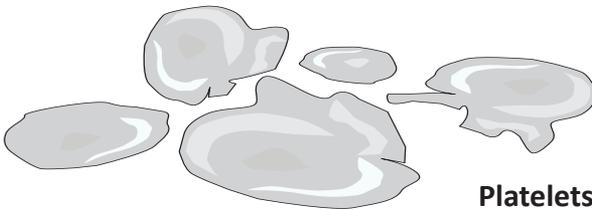
**Neutrophils**

2) **Red blood cells** carry oxygen to all parts of your body on hemoglobin (a part of the red blood cell). A low hemoglobin count is called anemia. When your hemoglobin count is low, you may feel tired. You may also feel dizzy or short of breath.



**Red blood cells**

3) **Platelets** help your blood to clot and stop bleeding when you have a cut. When they are low, you are more likely to bruise or bleed. See page 22, Bleeding.



**Platelets**

# Infection and Neutropenia

## What is this?

Chemo may lower your neutrophils. Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell that helps your body fight infection. See page 10, Blood Cells. A low neutrophil count is called neutropenia. Neutropenia puts you at risk of getting infections.



An **infection** when your neutrophils are low, can be a **life-threatening medical emergency**.

## What can I do?

Take your temperature.



## When should I take my temperature?

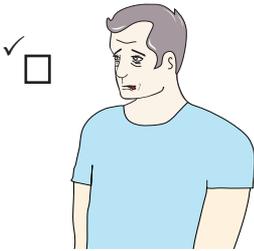


Every morning

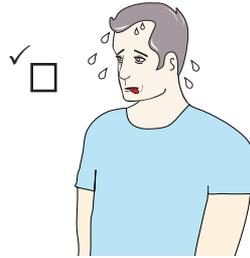


Every evening

## Other times when I should take my temperature:



If you feel unwell



If you feel hot

A fever may be the only way to know you have an infection. A fever is a temperature of 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**. Avoid eating, drinking, or smoking for at least 10 minutes before taking your temperature.



If you have a fever, **DO NOT TAKE** acetaminophen (Tylenol®), ibuprofen (Advil®), ASA (Asprin®) to treat the fever without speaking to your doctor or nurse first.



## When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?

- Fever (temperature) of **either**:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**
- You do not have a fever, but you have chills, or really do not feel well
- When you go to the Emergency Department, ask the nurse to “activate the febrile neutropenia workup”

## How can I prevent infections?

- Wash your hands for 15 seconds with soap and warm water:
  - Before and after eating
  - Before and after preparing food, especially raw meat
  - After using the toilet
  - When coming in from outside
  - After changing a baby's diaper
  - When they are visibly dirty
  - **Note:** you may choose to use a hand sanitizer (like Purell®). Use this only when soap and water are not close by



- After washing your hands, dry them well. Apply lotion to keep them from cracking
- Shower or take a bath every day
- Toileting
  - Always wash your hands after using the toilet
  - For women: wipe from front to back

## What should I avoid?

- Raw food (meat, poultry, eggs, seafood)
- Suppositories
- Enemas
- Dental work
- Crowded places and sick people (wear a new disposable mask each time, if you must go out among people)
- Construction and renovation
- Cut flowers, dried flowers, and plants

## What other resources are available?

Ask to speak to our nutritionist (dietician) about the MUHC Guidelines for Oncology Patients for more details on food safety precautions.

## When do I call for help?

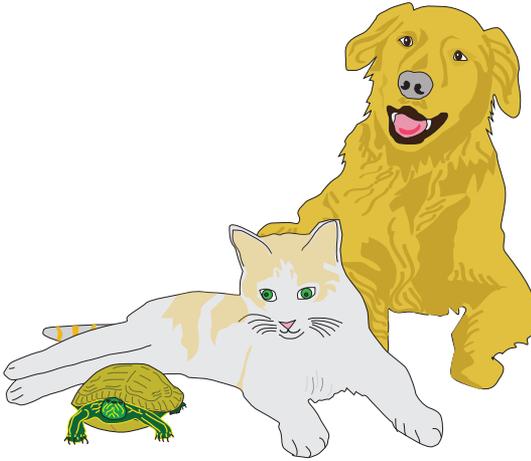
Speak to your treatment team if you have a fever, feel unwell or have any signs of infection like redness, swelling, pus, mucous, nasal drainage, pain, cough, sore throat, burning when urinating, shortness of breath, diarrhea, etc.



### **When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?**

- Fever (temperature) of **either**:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**
- You do not have a fever, but really do not feel well
- When you go to the Emergency Department, ask the nurse to “activate the febrile neutropenia workup”

## What can I do with my pets if I'm neutropenic? \*



Follow these simple rules so that you can continue to enjoy the company of your pet:

- Wash your hands after any contact
- Have someone else clean litter boxes, cages, aquariums, and dispose of animal waste
- Take your pet to see a vet at the first sign of illness
- Use only store-bought pet food
- Avoid contact with reptiles (snakes, turtles or lizards), ducklings or chicks. They are known to carry salmonella, a bacteria that can be passed to humans

What if I do **not have** someone to help me clean up after my pets?

- Wear a new disposable mask and new disposable gloves each time you clean
- Wash your hands well for 15 seconds afterwards

What if my pet **scratches** or **bites** me?

- Wash the area immediately with warm soapy water
- Wash your hands well for 15 seconds minimum



\* We do not recommend that you adopt any pets during your recovery. Strays and young animals can be sick or carry disease.

# Fatigue

## What is this?

Fatigue is feeling emotionally or physically tired. For many cancer patients, fatigue is the most troubling side-effect. Fatigue is not always relieved after you rest. It may remain for some time after your cancer treatment



Fatigue can be caused by:

- The cancer itself
- Treatments such as chemo, radiotherapy, and surgery
- Medications
- Not eating, drinking or sleeping enough
- Not being active
- Pain
- Stress, anxiety and depression. See page 40, Anxiety, and page 44, Depression.
- Low hemoglobin (anemia) See page 10, Blood Cells.

## What can I do?

### Save your energy:

- Be realistic about what you can do in one day. You may not be able to do as much in a day as you did before your treatment.
- Plan appointments and activities at the time of day when you have the most energy
- Plan breaks and rest periods
- Say “yes” to offers from family and friends to help you with things such as making meals, house work, shopping and childcare
- Sit down when doing activities, like putting on your shoes or making meals
- Rest. Allow yourself to take short naps (30 minutes only) every day.
- Try to get most of your sleep at night
- Limit visitors and ask them to call before visiting
- If you continue to work, ask about a flexible work schedule

### Restore your energy:

- Do mild exercise, like walking, every day
- Do activities that you enjoy such as listening to music, visiting with family and friends, or just going outside
- Give yourself credit for the things you are doing



## Eat a well-balanced diet:

- Before treatment starts, stock your kitchen with foods you enjoy
- Try preparing some meals in advance and freezing them



- Eat small meals frequently and snack often
- Eat foods high in protein: peanut butter, nuts (almonds, cashews, walnuts, pecans, peanuts), cheese, eggs, canned tuna and puddings
- Drink most of your fluids early in the day to avoid having to use the toilet through the night
- Do not drink caffeinated beverages, energy drinks or alcohol within 6 hours before bed. They may keep you up at night.



## What other resources are available?

The nutritional needs of people with cancer are different for each person. Ask to speak to our nutritionist (dietician).

If you are having difficulty preparing meals, ask about 'Meals on Wheels' type programs. These programs prepare and deliver food to your home. Speak to your nurse or social worker to make arrangements.

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if you have:

- Persistent fatigue or inability to sleep for 3 or more days
- Fatigue that reduces your quality of life and prevents you from carrying out everyday activities
- Shortness of breath while you move



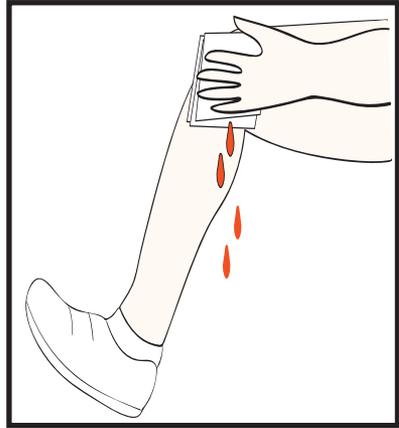
### **When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?**

- Sudden, extreme fatigue with chest pain, palpitations (sensation of increased heartbeat), or both
- Difficulty breathing while at rest

# Bleeding

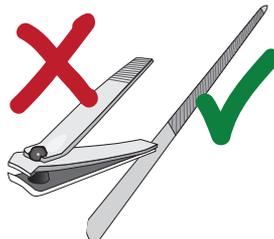
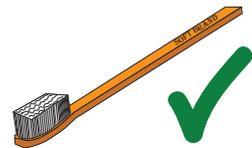
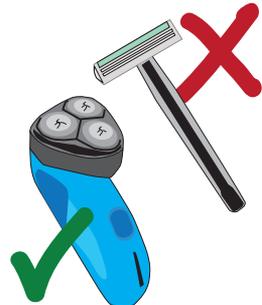
## What is this?

Chemo may lower your platelets. Platelets help to stop bleeding when you have a cut. When your platelets are low, you are more likely to bruise or bleed. See page 10, Blood Cells.



## To prevent bleeding when your platelets are low:

- Use an electric shaver instead of a razor
- Use a soft toothbrush
- To keep your bowel movements soft, take stool softeners. Do not strain when having a bowel movement
- Avoid enemas and suppositories
- File your nails instead of cutting them
- Always wear shoes or slippers
- Avoid contact sports
- Avoid anal intercourse
- Blow or wipe your nose gently



Special note to patients with heart conditions: low-dose ASA (example, Aspirin®) may be prescribed by your doctor or cardiologist. Your doctor can confirm whether it is okay to continue taking it when your platelet count is low.

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if you have:

- nose bleeds
- blood in urine
- blood in stool or black stool
- blood in sputum
- bruises
- red spots on your skin



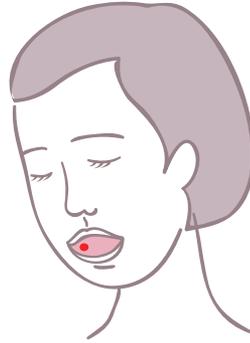
### **When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?**

- nosebleeds not relieved by applying pressure for 10 minutes
- vomiting blood
- coughing blood
- soaking one or more sanitary pads per hour (for women)

# Mouth Sores

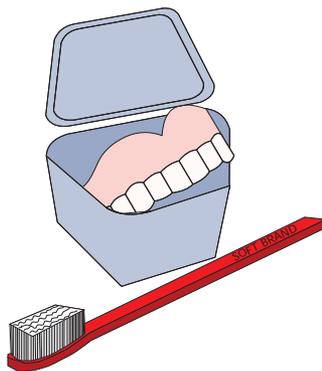
## What is this?

Chemo will destroy the cancer cells. It may also damage the healthy cells in your body that line your mouth and throat. You may have pain, sores, dryness or other problems in your mouth and throat.



## What can I do?

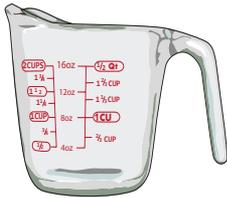
- Brush your teeth at least twice each day using a soft toothbrush
- If brushing hurts, use a sponge (mouth swab)
- Make sure your toothbrush has a chance to dry before using it again
- Clean your dentures after each meal
- Only use alcohol-free mouthwashes
- Use fluoride trays as directed by your dentist
- Take your pain medications



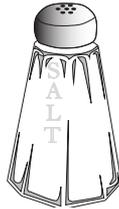
## Keep your mouth clean and moist

- Rinse your mouth as often as you like. Use 3 teaspoons (15 mL) of Salt Water & Baking Soda Rinse.\* Do this for 30 seconds and spit.
- Rinsing before and after meals may help you want to eat
- Use a lip balm after rinsing (water-based is best)

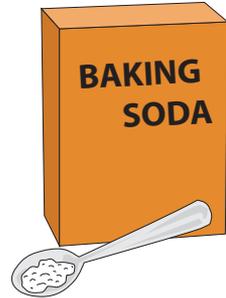
### \*Salt Water & Baking Soda Rinse Recipe:



2 cups (500 cc)  
of boiled water



1 teaspoon [5 mL]  
of table salt



1 teaspoon [5 mL]  
of baking soda

Store in fridge for up to 1 week.

If the taste bothers you, just add salt only or baking soda only. You may also choose to use just water that was boiled and cooled.

## What other resources are available?

- Your doctor may prescribe other mouth rinses. Use them as directed, after using the Salt Water & Baking Soda rinse.
- If you have more questions about your mouth, your dentist may be able to help

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if you have:

- Pain that makes it hard to eat, drink, swallow or talk
- Pain that is not relieved by medication or other treatments
- White patches or spots in your mouth
- Open sores, or ulcers in your mouth
- Blistered or cracked tongue
- Bleeding gums



### When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?

- Fever (temperature) of **either**:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**
- Unable to drink fluids, or take your medication, for 24 hours or more

# Nausea And Vomiting

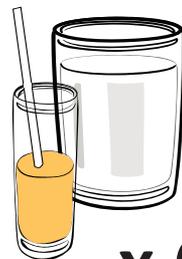
## What is this?

Nausea is a feeling of sickness in your stomach that may make you vomit (throw up). It is important to control nausea and vomiting so that you can drink, eat, and take your medications.



## What can I do?

- Take the medications prescribed by your doctor for nausea. If eating causes nausea or vomiting, take the medications for nausea one hour before eating.
- Keep your mouth clean
- Eat 6 small meals instead of 3 large meals each day
- Eat dry crackers or toast. (You may wish to keep some dry crackers by your bed to eat before getting up in the morning).
- Eat slowly and chew well
- Take small sips of cold, clear fluids (such as water, juice or broth) throughout the day. Try to drink at least 1500 mL (6 cups) each day.
- Try not to drink fluids at meals

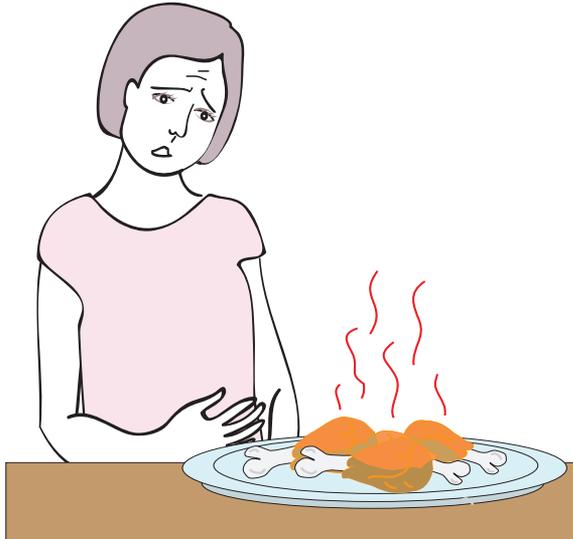


**x 6**

- Do not drink coffee as your first drink of the day



- Choose foods that are not spicy, greasy, or have a strong smell
- Relax after eating, but do not lie down or lean over for at least 30 minutes



## What other resources are available?

- For more suggestions, ask to speak to our nutritionist (dietician)

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if:

- Nausea or vomiting stops you from taking your prescribed medication
- You have vomited more than 3 times in 24 hours
- Your prescribed medications are not working to control your nausea or vomiting



### **When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?**

- You cannot drink fluids, or take your medication, for 24 hours or more
- You vomit many times, which stops you from eating or drinking
- You cannot keep foods and liquids down
- You are vomiting blood or black liquid
- You have intolerable stomach pain with vomiting
- You have an intolerable headache with vomiting

# Constipation

## What is this?

Constipation is:

- Difficulty moving your bowels (passing stool)
- Needing to push hard to move your bowels
- Moving your bowels less often than usual



## What can I do?



- Take your medications as prescribed



- Drink 8-10 glasses (2 litres) of liquid each day



- Eat foods high in fibre like prunes (prune juice), fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grain bread and bran cereals

- Moderate exercise can help



## What other resources are available?

You can buy stool softeners (example, Colace®) over the counter.

Many people need laxatives to relieve constipation. Over the counter laxatives such as Senokot® (sennosides) can help. This treatment is available in pill form or as a tea.

If you have any questions, your doctor, nurse, nutritionist (dietician) or pharmacist can help.

**Do not use any suppositories** unless prescribed by your doctor.

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if:

- No bowel movement for 3 days
- Not able to pass gas
- Stomach feels bloated or is swollen
- Stools are very hard and difficult to pass
- Constipation does not respond to medication



### When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?

- Sudden stomach pain, nausea, cramping, or bloating
- Loss of feeling in your rectal area
- Sudden loss of control of your bowels
- Bleeding from your rectum
- Fever (temperature) of **either**:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**

# Diarrhea

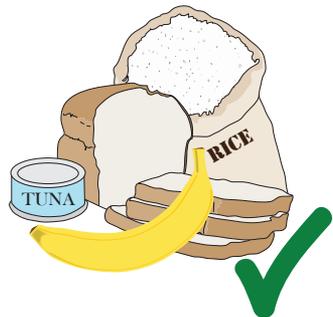
## What is this?

Diarrhea is when you have an increased number of bowel movements (stools) that are loose or watery.

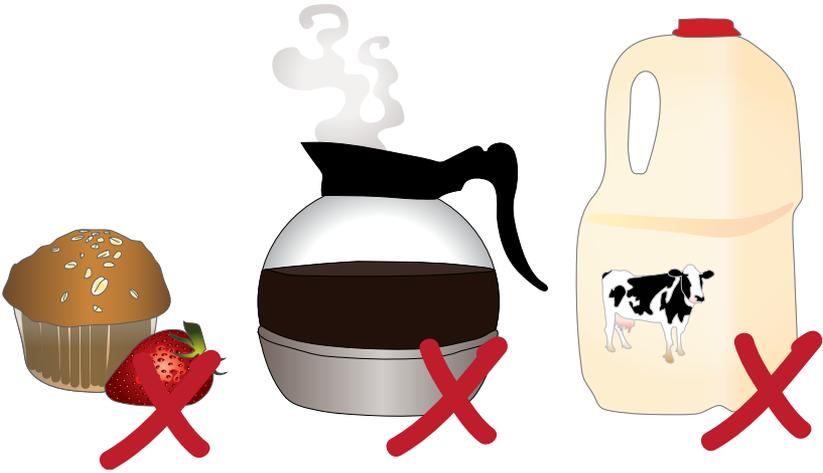


## What can I do?

- **STOP** any laxatives or stool softeners
- Eat low fibre foods: white rice, fish or chicken, bananas, applesauce, white bread
- Drink at least 8-10 glasses (2 litres) of liquid each day to prevent dehydration
- Drink water, fruit juice, soup, rehydration drinks (example, Gastrolyte®) or 'sports' drinks (example, Gatorade®, Powerade®). See page 34 for Rehydration Drink Recipe



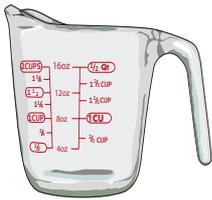
- Apply the cream suggested by your treatment team around the anal area for relief. (Do not use the applicator. Do not apply cream inside the rectum).
- Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about sitz baths
- **Avoid** milk, dairy products, caffeine, alcohol, orange or prune juice, foods high in fibre (beans, fresh and dried fruits) and spicy or fried foods



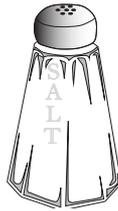
**Do not** decide on your own to take medication to stop the diarrhea. Only take the medication that is prescribed for you.

## Rehydration Drink Recipe:

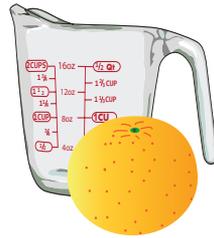
You can make your own rehydration drink. Mix 3 cups of boiled water with 1 teaspoon of salt and 1 cup of orange juice. Keep in fridge for up to 1 week.



3 cups (750 cc)  
of boiled water



1 teaspoon [5 mL]  
of table salt



1 cup (250 cc)  
of orange juice

## What other resources are available?

If you have any questions, your doctor, nurse, nutritionist or pharmacist can help.

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if you have:

- More than 3 watery bowel movements per day for 3 consecutive days
- Blood in the stool or black stool
- Fatigue
- Signs of dehydration like dizziness, palpitations, urinating less, feeling thirsty, dry mouth
- Sore skin in the anal area after frequent bowel movements



### When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?

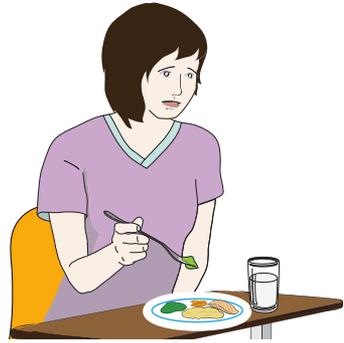
- More than 10 watery bowel movements per day
- Cramping, abdominal, or rectal pain with diarrhea
- Unable to drink any fluids
- Fever (temperature) of **either**:
  - 38.0° C (100° F) or more, for over one hour OR
  - 38.3° C (101° F) **just once**

# Loss Of Appetite

## What is this?

Appetite is hunger, which is your desire to eat.

Cancer and cancer treatments may decrease your appetite.

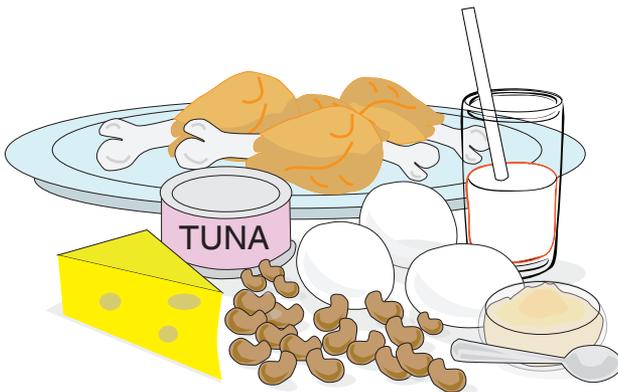


## What can I do?

Eating well will help you recover from your treatments. Good nutrition will help you feel stronger and better overall.

To help improve your appetite:

- Eat 6 small meals every day
- Snack as often as you can.
- Drink fluids between meals instead of with meals. This will help you avoid filling up too quickly.
- Eat your favourite foods.
- Choose foods that are high in calories and protein, for example: meat, poultry, fish, beans, cheese, eggs, yogurt, and whole milk



- If you find it difficult to eat enough or if you are losing weight, drink supplements like Boost® or Ensure®
- Do light exercise (like walking) every day



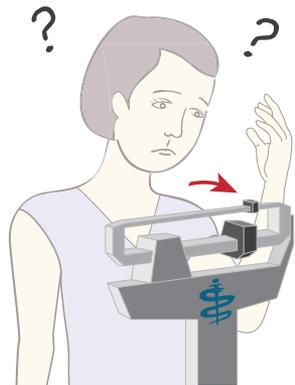
## What other resources are available?

- Ask to speak with our nutritionist (dietician) for help with loss of appetite, taste changes or dry mouth
- Ask our nutritionist about the MUHC Nutrition Guidelines for Oncology Patients

## When do I call for help?

Speak to your doctor, nurse, or pivot nurse if:

- You have not been eating for more than 3 days
- You have rapid weight loss



# Coping with Cancer

## What is this?

Coping is being able to deal with problems or challenges successfully. From the time you are diagnosed and during treatment, you may face situations that cause or make you feel unable to cope.



## **What resources are available?**

Social workers are here to help you cope. They can offer you the following:

- Short term individual, couple, or family counselling
- Crisis intervention related to your cancer diagnosis and treatment

## **Social workers can guide you and inform you about:**

- Linking with your CLSC and other community resources
- Financial issues
- Transportation assistance
- Temporary accommodation if you come from out of town
- Patient and family support groups in your area

You do not need a referral to get help. You just have to ask.

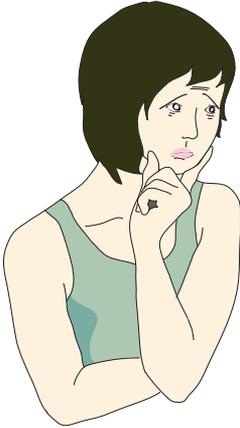
Social services 514-934-1934 ext. 31569

**The Psychosocial Oncology Program** offers free professional counselling. These services are available for outpatients and their family members. If you need their help, call (514) 934-1934, ext. 44816.

**Cedars CanSupport** offers free, bilingual support groups. You must be 18 years or older. Registration is required by calling (514) 934-1934, ext. 35297 or 31666.

# Anxiety

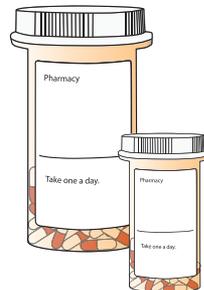
## What is this?



Anxiety is feeling nervous, scared or worried. It is normal to worry or feel anxious when faced with something difficult. From the time you are diagnosed and during treatment, you may face situations that cause or make these feelings worse.

## What can I do?

- Each person copes with anxiety in a different way. Be aware of what helps you cope.
- Exercises may help relieve anxiety. Try yoga, meditation, listening to music, deep breathing and relaxation. See page 56, Complementary and Alternative Therapies.
- If you already have anti-anxiety medication, take it as prescribed by your doctor.



## When do I call for help?



Call your treatment team if:

- You feel anxious most of the time
- You cannot cope
- You are so anxious that you cannot do your normal daily activities
- You notice changes in your sleep patterns: either sleeping more or not being able to sleep
- You cannot think clearly, focus or relax
- You are very irritable or have mood changes

## What other resources are available?

**Social Workers** can help you in many ways. They can offer short term supportive counseling to you, a partner, or a family member. They can counsel you if you face a crisis during your cancer care trajectory. They can offer emotional support as well assistance with instrumental and daily living concerns. You do not need a referral to get this help. You just have to ask.

**Cedars CanSupport** offers free, bilingual **support groups**. You must be 18 years or older. Registration is required.

To register, call (514) 934-1934, ext. 35297 or ext. 31666.

Cedars CanSupport also offers complementary therapies such as relaxation and massage. See page 56, Complementary and Alternative Therapies.

**Coping Skills Group:** Learn ideas to help better manage the emotional, physical and interpersonal stress of living with cancer. This group is available to patients and their caregivers (family and friends).

**Post-Treatment Group:** For patients who have completed their treatment (chemo, radiation, and/or surgery). Learn skills to adapt to this new life experience, manage emotions and fear of recurrence, and deal with concerns about self-esteem. Personal goals for health and for the future are also discussed.

**Spiritual Care Service** offers spiritual, emotional and religious support to people of all backgrounds. We see both patients and family members at the hospital. If you would like to speak to a member of our service, ask any staff member (nurse, doctor, etc.) to contact us for you.

The **Psychosocial Oncology Program** offers free professional counselling. These services are available for outpatients and their family members. If you need their help, call (514) 934-1934, ext. 44816.

### **Suicide Action Montreal**

In the Montreal region, you can dial 514-723-4000 to talk to someone about your situation 24/7

- If you are thinking of suicide
- If someone you know seems at risk for suicide

Outside Montreal, you can call  
1-866-APPELLE(1-866-277-3553).  
[www.suicideactionmontreal.org](http://www.suicideactionmontreal.org)



### **When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?**

- You have frequent thoughts of dying, trying to kill yourself or hurting yourself or others.
- You are so anxious that you are trembling, have tightness in your throat, or have a hard time breathing

# Depression

## What is this?



Depression can be:

- Feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopeless or helplessness that continue over a period of time
- Changes in sleep patterns, less energy, feeling tired. See page 18, Fatigue.
- Loss of appetite or weight loss. See page 36, Loss of Appetite.
- Problems thinking, remembering or making decisions
- Restlessness or irritability

## When do I call for help?



If any of these feelings continue or you are having difficulty coping, it is important to talk with your treatment team. You may be depressed, and may benefit from counselling or medication.

Remember, having cancer should not stop you from living a meaningful and enjoyable life.

## What other resources are available?

The **Psychosocial Oncology Program** offers free professional counselling. These services are available for outpatients and their family members. If you need their help, call (514) 934-1934, extension 44816.

**Spiritual Care Service** offers spiritual, emotional and religious support to people of all backgrounds. We see both patients and family members at the hospital. If you would like to speak to a member of our service, ask any staff member (nurse, doctor, etc.) to contact us for you.

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[www.suicideactionmontreal.org/](http://www.suicideactionmontreal.org/)



### **When do I go to the Emergency Department or call 911?**

- You have frequent thoughts of dying, trying to kill yourself or hurting yourself or others.

# Insomnia

## What is this?

Insomnia is when you find it hard to fall or stay asleep.

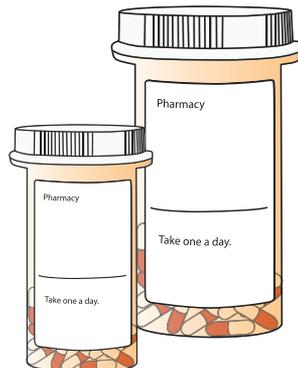


Insomnia can be caused by:

- Pain
- Medications
- Stress, depression or anxiety
- Caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, energy drinks)
- Drinks high in sugar (soft drinks, juice, alcohol)

## What can I do?

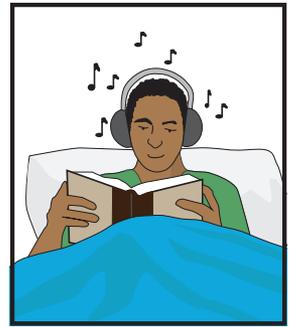
- Tell your doctor, who may choose to adjust your medications
- Take sleep medications as prescribed



- Cut down on drinks with caffeine or sugar (coffee, tea, alcohol, soft drinks, juice).
- Do not drink any of these 6 hours before bed. They may keep you up at night.



- Do not exercise just before going to bed. It may keep you awake.
- Make sure your room is dark and cool.
- Relax by reading or listening to soft music before bedtime.
- Go to bed at around the same time every night. Get up at the same time in the morning.



## When do I call for help?

Speak to your treatment team if:

- You have not been able to sleep for 3 days
- The medication prescribed by your doctor for sleep is not helping

## Cedars Can Support

A variety of support groups are available through Cedars CanSupport as well as many complementary therapies (see pages 56 to 57). Please contact 514-934-1934 ext. 35297 or 31666 or visit [CanSupport.ca](http://CanSupport.ca) for more information.

## Hair Loss

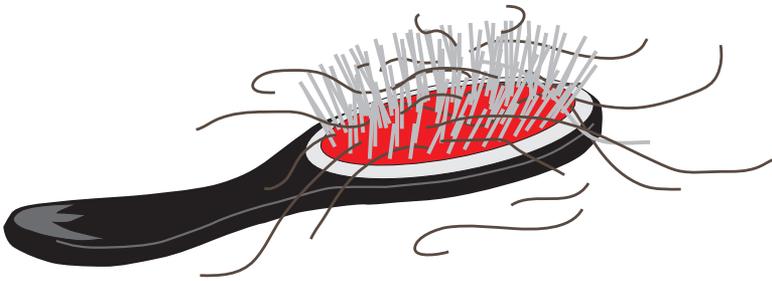
### What is this?

Chemo destroys cancer cells. It may also damage the healthy cells in your body that make your hair. This may cause you to lose your hair.



Hair loss depends on the type of chemo given. You can discuss your chances of hair loss with your treatment team.

- It usually starts 1 to 3 weeks after chemo, and can continue for up to 6 weeks after chemo
- It will likely start on your head. It may continue to other parts of your body (eyebrows, eyelashes and pubic hair).
- You may notice it first as hair on your pillow
- Some people lose all of their hair. Others may have 'patchy' hair loss.
- Your head may be itchy or more sensitive

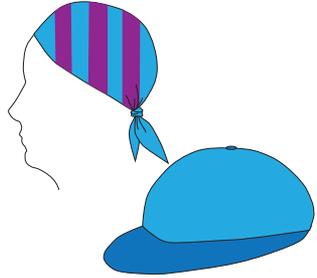


It is normal to feel upset about losing your hair with chemotherapy. When hair loss happens, it is usually temporary. You will likely have a full head of hair in 6 months to 1 year. However, it may grow back with a different colour and texture.

## What can I do?

You may choose to:

- Cut your hair short or shave your head before you lose your hair
- Wear a wig, scarf, turban or hat



Be gentle with your hair:

- Use a mild shampoo
- If blow drying, use a cool setting
- Brush gently
- Avoid strong hair treatments like dyes or permanents (perms)



Protect your head:

- Cover your head from the sun
- For your scalp, use a broad spectrum sun screen with a SPF of 30 or more
- Wear a hat to stay warm



## What other resources are available?



**Cedars CanSupport** provides :

- Wigs, caps and turbans
- Look Good Feel Better sessions to provide hands-on cosmetic workshop for female patients

Call or drop by Monday to Friday.

### **Cedars CanSupport Resource Centre**

Room D.01.1329

(main entrance, Cedars Cancer Centre)

[www.cansupport.ca](http://www.cansupport.ca)

Tel: (514) 934-1934 ext. 31666

# Sexual Health

## What is this?

Many patients worry about their sex life. Illness and worry can affect how a person responds sexually. Cancer and the effects of treatment can decrease your interest in having sex. Learning to manage these effects may help.



## What can I do?

Speak to your treatment team about your concerns.

## Is it okay to have sex during treatment?

Check with your doctor to make sure it is safe for you and your partner. Listen to your body and do what feels right for you.

## What about sex when my neutrophils or platelets are low?

You should not have oral, penile/vaginal and anal sex during this time. This may increase your risk of infection or bleeding.

### **Do my partner and I need to use contraception (birth control)?**

Yes. Speak to your treatment team if you need help choosing the right method of birth control for you.

### **Do we need to use a condom?**

Yes. You should use a condom during treatment and for the first 4 days after each treatment. This will protect your partner from small amounts of chemo that could be in your body fluids.

### **What if I find sex painful?**

You could buy a water-based lubricant at any pharmacy. This may increase comfort during sex.



### **What if I don't feel like having sex anymore?**

Some people prefer to find other ways to feel close, like cuddling, caressing, and watching a movie together. Talk to your partner about your feelings. This can help you both feel more comfortable about this subject.

## **Will I be able to have children after treatment?**

This will depend on your treatment. Some patients may be eligible for treatments to preserve their ability to have children. If this is a concern for you, speak to your treatment team as soon as possible.



## **Will my menstrual cycle (period) be affected?**

This will depend on the treatment. Speak to your treatment team.

## **Can chemo cause impotence?**

This will depend on the treatment. Speak to your treatment team.

## **Can chemo cause menopause?**

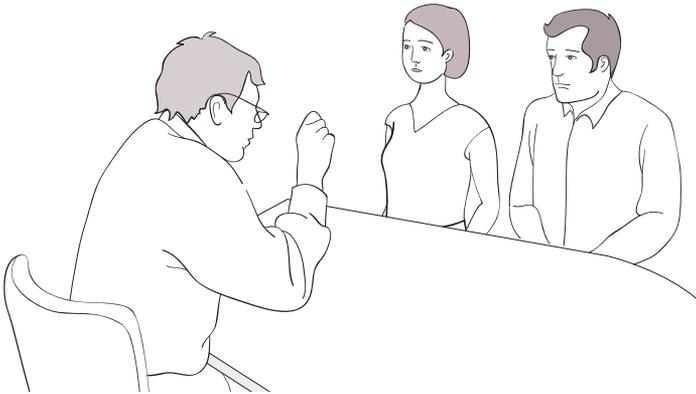
Yes, chemotherapy may cause irregular periods or stop them entirely. You may develop symptoms of menopause including hot flashes, vaginal dryness, and others. Speak to your treatment team if you have symptoms or concerns.

## What other resources are available?

Most patients worry about how their treatments will affect their sexuality, but few talk to someone about it.

Your treatment team can help. Talk to us about your questions and any other important issues related to your sexual health.

The **Psychosocial Oncology Program** offers free professional counselling. These services are available for outpatients and their family members. If you need their help, call (514) 934-1934 ext. 44816.



# Complementary and Alternative Therapies

## What are these?

You may have heard of the terms 'alternative' or 'complementary' therapies. How can you know if they are safe? How can you know if they will help you?



The definitions below may help to answer some of your questions.

### **Conventional Medicine:**

Medicine practiced by medical doctors who may also practice complementary and alternative medicine. Other terms for conventional medicine are western, regular, traditional medicine and biomedicine.

### **Alternative Medicine:**

Other types of therapies used instead of conventional medicine. They are used to treat or improve disease.

### **Complementary Therapies:**

Therapies that can be used with conventional medicine.

## What can I do?

Your doctor or pharmacist should be aware of everything that goes into your body (e.g., chemo, supplements, herbal teas, medication, etc.) Not all treatments (chemo and alternative/complementary therapies) are safe together. Some natural therapies may change how chemo works in your body. They may increase the side effects or decrease the effect of your chemo on your cancer. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about any method you are considering.

### Complementary Therapies

When you are getting chemo, you can contact Cedars CanSupport to learn more about any of the following free Complementary Therapy services:



- Meditation / Relaxation Therapy

Simple breathing exercises and relaxation training can help decrease stress, anxiety, pain and insomnia

- Reiki

A light touch or no touch technique that promotes very deep relaxation, strengthening the body's ability to heal

- Therapeutic Massage

Can provide temporary relief from side-effects, and may help to relieve pain and anxiety

## **Complementary Therapies (continued)**

- Music Therapy

Music therapy helps to reduce anxiety and feelings of loneliness or isolation. It can also give you a distraction from symptoms, and may help you to relax and improve your mood.

- Art therapy

Art therapy can be a haven or an activity to reduce anxiety and relieve boredom. You can learn new skills or just have fun. **NO TALENT IN ART IS NEEDED.**

- Drama therapy

Drama therapy can help people explore their experiences and emotions, gain insight into their responses and learn new ways of coping.

CanSupport also offers exercise and yoga classes in groups settings in different studios outside the hospital.

Call or drop by Monday through Friday.

### **Cedars CanSupport Resource Centre**

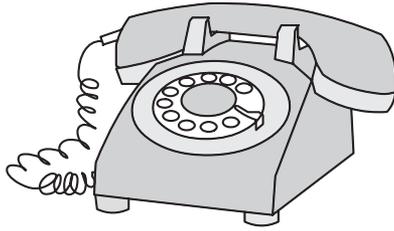
Room D.01.1329

(main entrance, Cedars Cancer Centre)

Tel: (514) 934-1934 ext. 31666



# Important Telephone Numbers



**Cedars Cancer Centre**

(514) 843-1581 or (514) 934-8007

Monday - Friday, 8:00 - 16:00

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Resources



You and your family members can find more information and services online or by calling the following:

**American Cancer Society:** [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**BC Cancer Agency:** [www.bccancer.bc.ca](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca)

**Canadian Cancer Society:** [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)  
1-888-939-3333

**Cancer Care Ontario:** [www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

**Canadian Sleep Society:** [www.canadiansleepsociety.ca](http://www.canadiansleepsociety.ca)

**Cedars CanSupport Resource Centre:** [www.cansupport.ca](http://www.cansupport.ca)  
(514) 934-1934 ext. 31666

**ChemoReady:** [www.chemoready.ca](http://www.chemoready.ca)

**National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship:**

[www.canceradvocacy.org](http://www.canceradvocacy.org)

**Quebec Cancer Foundation:** <https://fqc.qc.ca/>

1-800-363-0063

**Quebec Quit Smoking:** [www.iquitnow.qc.ca](http://www.iquitnow.qc.ca)

1-866-527-7383

or **Health Canada** website: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

**Smoking Cessation Program - Montreal Chest Institute:**

(514) 934-1934 ext. 32503

## Acknowledgments

The contents were derived from materials developed by nurses within the McGill University Health Centre. We wish to thank the authors of these documents:

- *How to Manage the Side Effects of Your Treatment* by the Montreal General Hospital's (MGH's) Oncology Day Centre
- *Home After Chemotherapy* by 17-East at the MGH
- *Self Care Guide for Patients* by the Royal Victoria Hospital's (RVH's) Oncology Day Centre
- *Going Home After Chemotherapy* by 7-Medical at the RVH
- *Young Adult Program* by the RVH – Division of Oncology

Other resources used to create the booklet can be found in our Resource and Reference lists. See page 62.

We also wish to thank those patients and families who helped us select the topics and those who took the time to review the content. Their feedback and ideas helped to shape this booklet.









# Help Us Help Others

Help support the MUHC Patient Education Office! Donations make a huge difference. They help us create health information materials and programs to deliver the best care for life.

All patient materials are freely available on the internet to MUHC patients, and to patients and families everywhere.

Make a donation through the Cedar's Cancer Foundation:



**Online:** [www.cedars.ca](http://www.cedars.ca)

**By Phone:** (514) 843-1606

**In Person / By Mail:**

2155 Guy Street, Suite 900,  
Montreal (Quebec) H3H 2R9

## Thank you for your support!

MUHC Patient Education Office: [muhcpatienteducation.ca](http://muhcpatienteducation.ca)

**Ask your treatment team if you need to cut out this card and keep it with you.**

When you go to the Emergency Department because you have a fever, or no fever but have chills, please give this card to the triage nurse.



**Centre universitaire  
de santé McGill**



**McGill University  
Health Centre**

I am a cancer patient  
I recently received chemotherapy  
I had a fever at home or have chills

**Please activate the febrile neutropenia workup**