

Caring for Yourself During Immunotherapy

Your Immune System

Your immune system helps your body fight infections and other diseases. When germs such as bacteria or viruses invade your body, they attack and multiply. This is called an infection. The infection causes the disease that makes you sick.

Your immune system protects you from the disease by fighting off the germs. It can also help defend your body against cancer cells.

Cancer is a disease in which abnormal cells in the body grow out of control. Sometimes, cancer is able to outsmart or hide from your immune system. This means your body is not able to fight off the cancer.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy is a treatment that helps your immune system fight cancer. There are several types of immunotherapy that can be used, and it can be given in different ways such as by mouth (oral), through an intravenous (IV) line, or directly into the bladder through a catheter.

The boost in your immune system from this treatment can cause inflammatory reactions in different parts of your body. It may also cause your immune system to attack healthy cells. This can cause a variety of side effects during or after treatment.

When to Call the Clinic

Call the clinic if you have

- chills or a temperature of 100.4 or higher
- any questions or concerns about your treatment.

During normal clinic hours, please call the triage nurse:

After hours, please call:

What to Bring to Your Treatment

- Wear comfortable clothing that allows easy access to your Port-A-Cath® (if you have one) or your arms for an intravenous (IV) line.
- Bring snacks (such as trail mix or nuts, crackers, fruit or fruit cups, cereal, pretzels) or lunch.
- Bring things to help you pass the time during your treatment such as books, puzzles, playing cards, reading materials or electronic devices.

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Side Effects

The most common side effects include:

- shortness of breath or cough
- diarrhea
- abdominal pain
- rashes and itching.

Tell your medical oncologist if you develop any of the side effects listed above or any other concerning or unusual side effects. If you have side effects, your medical oncologist may have you take a steroid to help treat them.

You may also have changes in your thyroid, liver or kidneys. Your cancer care team will watch for any of these changes with regular blood work.

Prevent Infections

Immunotherapy can increase your risk of getting an infection. Here are some ways to help prevent getting an infection:

- Hand washing is the most important way to prevent spreading an infection. Wash your hands often with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds. You should wash your hands:
 - before preparing or eating food
 - before touching your eyes, nose or mouth
 - after using the restroom
 - after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
 - after touching clinic surfaces such as an exam table, desk, doorknob or chair.
- Avoid crowds.
- Avoid visiting family and friends who are sick.

Eat Well and Stay Hydrated

Good nutrition is important to help you heal and feel better and stronger.

- Eat a well-balanced diet and have regular meals.
- If you have a decreased appetite, eat smaller meals more often throughout the day. Do not overeat.

Staying hydrated can help your body work better and feel better.

- To help prevent dehydration, drink six to eight 8-ounce cups of liquids each day. Examples include water, juice, decaffeinated coffee, tea, Popsicles® or soup.
- Try to drink 4 cups before noon and 4 cups throughout the afternoon.

If you would like more help meeting your nutritional needs, a dietitian is available to work with you and your cancer care team.

Manage Fatigue

Fatigue is a feeling of tiredness that can keep you from doing the things you normally do or want to do. It is one of the most common side effects of cancer treatment.

Here are some ways to help manage fatigue:

- Regular activity can help reduce fatigue. Try to walk 30 minutes each day. You can break up this time into multiple shorter walks as needed.
- Try doing smaller amounts of activity more often instead of doing a lot all at once.
- Listen to your body. When you notice that you are starting to get tired, take a break and then restart the activity a little later.
- Try to get a good night's sleep. Rest and take naps when you need them.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of liquids.

Cancer rehabilitation

Cancer rehabilitation can help you before, during and after cancer treatment. Rehabilitation benefits include:

- **Before treatment:** It can help build your overall strength and endurance.
- **During treatment:** It can help you maintain mobility and reduce your pain and discomfort.
- **After treatment:** It can help you regain function, decrease fatigue and build strength.

If you need help with managing your fatigue or other side effects from your cancer treatment, ask a member of cancer care team for a referral to cancer rehabilitation.

Manage Stress

Stress is your body's fight-or-flight response. You may feel energy surge through your body if you are in an emergency, or if you are worried or anxious about something.

To help manage your stress, there are skills you can learn such as:

- meditation and relaxation techniques
- breathing techniques
- guided imagery and biofeedback
- self-care practices.

Talk with a member of your health care team if you would like to learn more about these skills.

Limit Sun Exposure

Cancer treatment can increase your skin's sensitivity to the sun.

- Wear protective clothing when you are in the sun such as long sleeves, pants and a wide brim hat.
- Wear sunglasses with large lenses that fit close to your face.
- Sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 30 or higher provides high protection against sunburn. Make sure you wear sunscreen whenever you're outside – even on cloudy days.
- Try to limit your time out in the sun between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.