

# CAREGIVING DURING TREATMENT

## Preparing the Home

*During and after cancer treatment, your loved one may find life at home becomes increasingly challenging. Make changes to the home that will make life easier and safer if your loved one is experiencing mobility issues, peripheral neuropathy, pain or weakness after treatment.*

Here are some things you might want to do around the home to make it more comfortable and safer for your loved one.

- ▶ Put items in easy-to-reach places. For example, put clothing in baskets or drawers instead of on high shelves or in closets.
- ▶ Lower the patient's bed or get a step stool to make getting into and out of bed easier.
- ▶ Keep stairs and hallways well lit.
- ▶ Get rid of slippery rugs that can slide or bunch up causing a tripping hazard.
- ▶ Add a shower seat and hand-held showerhead to make bathing easier.
- ▶ Use nonslip bath mats, both inside and outside the tub/shower. Add a safety bar or hand grips to reduce the risk of falls.
- ▶ Purchase a raised toilet seat or commode.
- ▶ Use non-breakable dishes and cups for food.

Depending on your loved one's diagnosis, treatment, and overall health, you may need professional help to make larger or structural changes to their home. For example, if your loved one is wheelchair bound, you will need to add a ramp to the entrance of the home.

## Other Things You Can Do to Prepare the Home

Here are some other things you can do to

prepare your loved one's home:

- ▶ Stock the pantry, fridge, and freezer with healthy food choices.
- ▶ Move comfortable, easy-to-wear clothing to an easily accessible part of the closet.
- ▶ Keep throw blankets and extra quilts in a convenient location. Cancer patients can be more susceptible to cold.



Use the worksheet titled **Grocery List** as a guide while stocking the pantry.

## Protecting a Weakened Immune System

*Cancer patients, especially those undergoing chemotherapy or a stem cell transplant, are at higher risk for infection because the immune system is compromised. If a patient with a weakened immune system catches a cold or gets another type of infection, their body will have a more difficult time fighting it compared to someone who is healthy.*

The following tips can help you and your loved one avoid infections:

- ▶ Avoid crowds and anyone who is sick.
- ▶ Wear a mask in crowds or in waiting areas at medical offices and hospitals.
- ▶ If your loved one needs to go to the emergency room, make sure to alert the staff that they are being treated for cancer and has a compromised immune system.
- ▶ Avoid activities that put the patient at risk for cuts or injury.
- ▶ Clean cuts and scrapes immediately with warm water, soap, and an antiseptic. If the patient is at risk for bleeding issues due to a low platelet

## FACT

Peripheral neuropathy results from damage to the nerves in the arm, legs, hands or feet which can cause numbness, tingling, burning, coldness or weakness in the affected area. It can be a side effect of some cancer treatments. Peripheral neuropathy can also lead to mobility issues.



in the home with the patient should get a flu shot and updated vaccines, if needed, too.

- ▶ When getting immunized against the flu, cancer patients, caregivers and the other people living in the home who have contact with the patient should receive the flu shot, not the nasal spray vaccine because the spray contains the live flu virus. Flu shots are made of a dead version of the virus. The live virus can be dangerous for those who are immunocompromised.
- ▶ If you do receive a live vaccine, ask the healthcare team how long you need to stay away from your loved one for.
- ▶ Properly care for and clean the patient's catheter or port.

Contact the healthcare team immediately if you notice any of the following signs of infection:

- ▶ A temperature of 100.5°F or higher
- ▶ Chills
- ▶ Persistent coughing

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- ▶ Tenderness and/or redness at a site that could be prone to infection
- ▶ A sore throat
- ▶ Pain when urinating
- ▶ Frequent diarrhea or loose bowel movements

## Cleaning the Home

*You may need to help to keep the house clean. A clean home lowers the risk of infection for the patient.*

### Cleaning Safety

Many household cleaners contain toxic ingredients. Always follow the directions on the product’s bottle or box. Cleaners that aren’t properly wiped or washed away could irritate the skin or accidentally be ingested. Strong fumes can irritate eyes and make breathing difficult. Patients undergoing chemotherapy may also be sensitive to the strong smells of cleaning products.

You don’t have to spend a lot of money for safe cleaning supplies. Vinegar and baking soda are non-toxic items that most of us already have in our homes, and they can be effective and affordable cleaners. Mix baking soda and water into a paste to clean the oven and tackle toilet stains. Clean and shine mirrors, windows and floors with a vinegar and water mixture. Make your own safe, green cleaner with ½ cup vinegar, ¼ cup baking soda, and ½ gallon of water.

The following cleaning tips will help to keep you and your loved one safe:

- ▶ Avoid products with chlorine, ammonia, synthetic solvents and artificial fragrances and dyes.
- ▶ Use fragrance-free laundry detergent.
- ▶ Avoid aerosol cans.
- ▶ Wear gloves when cleaning.

- ▶ Open windows and doors while cleaning or run a fan to let out strong fumes from cleaning products.
- ▶ Do not mix bleach with ammonia or vinegar. This can produce chlorine gas, which is a toxic chemical.
- ▶ Instead of aerosol air fresheners use oils or wax warmers instead.
- ▶ If the patient is sensitive to smells or if strong odors trigger nausea, it may be best not to use any type of air freshener.

### Chore Chart

To stay on top on household chores, make a cleaning schedule. It’s easier to clean a little bit every day than to try to clean a whole house in a few hours. Below is an example of a chore chart to keep you on task.

If there are other people living in your household who can help, delegate chores to them as well. Hang the chart on your refrigerator as a reminder.

If financially possible, hire a cleaning service to help keep the home tidy. Even if a regular house cleaner isn’t an option, it may be helpful to have the house cleaned thoroughly before treatment starts so all that you will need to do is light cleaning, as needed. If you can’t afford a cleaning service, look for free or discounted cleaning services for cancer patients, or ask friends and family to help.

Make sure that anyone helping to clean knows all the safety “dos” and “don’ts” listed above. You may want them to use your cleaning supplies rather than bringing their own into the patient’s home.

DAY	DONE	CHORE
Monday	✓	Take out the trash
	✓	Wipe down the bathroom counters
	✓	Clean Bathroom Mirror
Tuesday	✓	Water the plants
	✓	Laundry
	✓	Vacuum living room



Use the **Chore Chart** to create your cleaning schedule.

## Hygiene and Personal Care

*Good hygiene and personal care practices help lower the risk of infection in immunosuppressed patients.*

As a caregiver, wash your hands with soap and warm water frequently, especially before handling food or assisting your loved one with any tasks. Encourage visitors to the home or people interacting with the patient to do the same. You can also use liquid or gel hand sanitizer to keep hands clean.

The patient may also need to modify their hygiene habits. Here are guidelines to share with your loved one.

### Skin Care

Good skin care can lower the risk of infection from minor cuts and scrapes. Encourage your loved one to:

- ▶ Take a warm (not hot) bath or shower every day with unscented soap or body wash.
- ▶ Pat skin dry instead of rubbing with a towel.
- ▶ Use unscented lotion for dry skin to prevent cracking.
- ▶ Use lip balm for dry or chapped lips.
- ▶ Use an electric shaver instead of a razor to prevent cuts and reduce the risk of infection.

### Nail Care

Taking proper care of fingernails and toenails can lower the risk of infection from minor wounds or cuts around the nails or cuticles. Advise your loved one to

- ▶ Keep nails clean, dry and short because nails may darken, crack or become brittle as a result of treatment.
- ▶ Avoid cuticle cutting and artificial nails. If interested in a manicure or pedicure, ask the health care team
- ▶ Not to pick or pull at cuticles or loose skin around the nails.

## TIP

SOUL RYEDERS' The Wig Exchange provides high-quality wigs and practical tips for managing the issues surrounding cancer-related hair loss. In addition, The Wig Exchange provides a meaningful way for women to recycle their gently used wigs while helping others facing cancer.

Visit our website to learn more.



### Hair Care

Hair loss is a common side effect of cancer treatment. Hair loss can be upsetting and affect the patient's self-confidence. Be sensitive to these feelings. Avoid saying things such as "it's just hair," "it will grow back," or "you look better with short hair." Although these comments are all well intentioned, they can undermine the patient's valid feelings. A patient dealing with hair loss should be encouraged to:

- ▶ Wash their hair with a mild, conditioning shampoo.
- ▶ Continue to comb their hair, even if hair loss begins. Not combing or washing hair will not prevent hair loss.
- ▶ Use hats, scarves, caps, or bandanas to keep the head warm and to protect the delicate scalp from sunburns when outdoors..
- ▶ Use mineral oil or coconut oil to moisturize the scalp, if dry.
- ▶ Consider purchasing a wig. There are 'halo' wigs which can be made with the patient's own hair. It needs to be cut a special way, prior to it falling out. See the resource section for more information

## TIP

### Homemade Mouthwash:

Mix 1/4 teaspoon of baking soda and 1/8 teaspoon of salt in a cup of warm water.



- ▶ Consider shaving their head or getting a short haircut before treatment begins. This may make the experience of hair falling out more manageable both physically and emotionally.

### Dental and Mouth Care

When treatment is not urgent, patients should visit a dentist at least 4 weeks before treatment starts. A pre-treatment oral evaluation will identify problems, such as cavities, fractured teeth, loose crowns or fillings, or gum disease. Addressing any of these problems in advance will reduce the risk of complications during treatment.

- ▶ Use a toothbrush with soft bristles to brush teeth and gums 2-3 times a day.
- ▶ Rinse the mouth several times a day.
- ▶ Do not use a mouthwash that contains alcohol, especially if the patient experiences mouth sores as a side effect. Alcohol can exacerbate the soreness.
- ▶ Clean dentures well and remove them when not eating to ease a sore mouth.
- ▶ Tell the healthcare team about bleeding gums or white patches in the mouth. Both can be signs of infection.
- ▶ Avoid tobacco use, which can irritate the mouth.



Visit [www.smokefree.gov](http://www.smokefree.gov) for smoking and tobacco cessation resources.

## Pets

*Talk to the healthcare team about any pets in the patient’s home. Being around animals, including pets, may increase the risk of infection for your loved one. You may need to take special precautions to reduce this risk.*

While going through cancer treatment, it’s best for you and your loved one to follow these basic guidelines:

- ▶ Clean up after pets for your loved one by cleaning the litter box or changing dog pads. If the pet has an accident, be sure to disinfect the area. Wash your hands well afterwards.
- ▶ Keep litter boxes away from the kitchen and dining room.
- ▶ If the pet is sick, take the pet to the vet right away. The pet may have an infection that could be passed on to your loved one (who may have a weakened immune system).
- ▶ Avoid scratches. Keep the dog’s or cat’s nails trimmed to minimize the risk of scratches. If the patient does get scratched, clean the scratches well and check frequently for signs of infection. Let the healthcare team know about scratches.
- ▶ Keep pets up-to-date on vaccines, heartworm prevention, and give flea and tick medications, if indicated, to reduce risk.
- ▶ Do not adopt new pets or take in strays during cancer treatment since you do not know the animal’s health status.
- ▶ Avoid reptiles, turtles, chickens, ducks, and rodents, all of which can carry salmonella and other germs that may cause infection. Salmonella can lead to severe diarrhea, and it can be especially dangerous for cancer patients.
- ▶ Find a good pet sitter. If your loved one has to spend time at the hospital for surgery or treatment, make sure there is a reliable pet sitter lined up to take care of the pet.

As long as you are communicating with the healthcare team and are taking the appropriate measures to reduce the risk of infection, pets can often stay by your loved one’s side during cancer treatment. Pets can offer many benefits, including companionship, improved mood, and motivation to stay active.

# CAREGIVING DURING TREATMENT NOTES

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