

# What you can eat when your Neutrophil count is low

Clinical Oncology & Haematology

## Who is this information for?

This information is for patients whose neutrophil count is low because of their treatment or the type of cancer they have.

## Why do I need to take care over my diet?

Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell and are important for fighting infection. A normal neutrophil count is between 2.5 and 7.5. When your neutrophil count is less than 2.5 this is called "neutropaenia".

Neutropaenia is described as mild when your neutrophils are between 2.0 – 2.5, moderate when your neutrophil count is between 0.5 - 2.0, and severe when less than 0.5.

When your neutrophil count is low, you have an increased risk of infection. This booklet will help you to minimise the risk of picking up a food related infection from bacteria and other germs in food, by advising you on choosing safer foods.

## What happens in hospital?

If your neutrophil count is above 0.5 you will still be able to choose from the normal hospital menu. However you should still follow the advice in this leaflet regarding food safety and handling, and avoid high risk foods – see table at end of the leaflet.

## What can I drink and is tap water safe to drink?

Freshly run tap water from the cold water tap is safe to drink. Run the water tap for long enough to draw off the stale water left standing in the pipes.

It is safer to avoid filtered water and bottled still water.

Milk must be fresh and pasteurised, sterilised or UHT farm milk that has not undergone any treatment must be avoided.

Squashes, fizzy drinks and long-life cartons of fruit juice are also fine, but it is best if small bottles or cartons are used in preference to having large ones left open for more than 24 hours. Always clean the tops of cans and bottles before opening them and avoid drinking straight from the can or bottle.

**The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.**

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

## Can I continue with nutritional supplements?

If you are taking nutritional supplements such as Fortisip, Fortijuice or Forticreme, it is safe to continue with these. Always try to use them as soon as possible after opening.

## Is it safe to have extra food from home?

If family and friends are bringing in foods from home, let them know you are neutropaenic. They should prepare any foods carefully, having washed their hands well, wiped down work surfaces and used fresh ingredients. All foods must be thoroughly cooked and kept piping hot for you, or chilled down (if appropriate) as quickly as possible. Food cannot be reheated on the ward.

Takeaways should be avoided.

Take care to ensure that any food brought in is eaten as soon as possible or stored safely (covered and chilled, if appropriate). Herbs and spices, including pepper, may be used in cooking, but should not be added afterwards.

If your family or friends are suffering from sickness or diarrhoea, it is better they do not prepare any food for you.

Suitable snacks from home include:

- Biscuits (preferably in small packets)
- Cakes – avoiding those with fresh cream
- Washed fruit that can be peeled on the ward
- Individual bags of crisps or other savoury snacks
- Wrapped sweets and chocolates.

Check all are within their “use by” date.

Please refer to the list of “high risk” foods at the end of this leaflet, and ask your family to not include any of these.

## Is there anything else I should do?

You can minimise the risk of picking up a food related infection by following this advice. Remember the importance of washing your hands after going to the toilet, and before eating.

## What happens at home?

If your neutrophil count is still low when you are at home, the following advice will apply.

## What should I do when shopping?

- Check “use-by” dates on all perishable foods, and keep to them. Whilst “best before” dates do not mean that the food is unsafe to eat beyond the date, it will have lost some of its quality. It is safer to keep to “best before” dates for eggs
- Try to buy food from shops displaying good hygiene, for example where meat, poultry and fish are kept chilled; where raw and cooked meats are separated and where shop assistants use utensils or gloves to handle food.
- Avoid buying damaged tins or packets, and fruit and vegetables which are bruised or going mouldy
- Buy chilled or frozen foods last, and take them home as quickly as possible so they do not have time to start to thaw. Use a cool-bag (if you have one) or pack all frozen foods together for insulation
- Avoid loose delicatessen foods whenever possible, such as unwrapped meats, samosas, pies, coleslaw and potato salad, rice etc.

## How should I store food safely?

- Keep all perishable foods in the coldest part of your refrigerator (usually the bottom), which should be 5°C or lower. Fridge thermometers are not expensive to buy and will tell you if your fridge needs resetting
- Don't overload your fridge or leave the door open longer than necessary
- Keep raw meats away from cooked meats, and store them at the bottom of the fridge. If you are thawing raw meat, place it in a container that will hold any blood or juices and stop them from dripping onto other foods
- Store all opened foods according to the directions on the packet. Any remaining tinned food should be emptied out into a clean container and covered with a lid or cling-film
- Eggs are best stored in the fridge until needed
- Remember to check your fridge and throw away any out of date items
- Clean and defrost your fridge on a regular basis.

## What other precautions should I take at home?

### In your kitchen:

- Always wash your hands well before preparing any food, and wash them in between handling raw and cooked products
- Change your kitchen towels, tea-cloths and dish-cloths regularly, and let crockery and cutlery air-dry, if possible
- Use separate knives and chopping boards for preparing raw meat and poultry, cooked foods and vegetables.

### Cooking food:

- Always cook food thoroughly to ensure any harmful bacteria are killed. Follow instructions on labels and in recipe books
- Make sure frozen meats and poultry are completely thawed before cooking
- It is safer to use conventional methods of cooking, but if you use a microwave, follow instructions for the power output of your appliance, and allow standing time for the heat to reach all parts of the food
- Remember to wash and peel all fruit and vegetables.

### Pets:

- Always wash your hands after feeding, cleaning out or handling pets
- Keep them away from your food and kitchen surfaces
- Use separate dishes and utensils for feeding pets and wash them up separately to your own dishes
- Use gloves when gardening, as soil may be contaminated by pets.
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- Use separate dishes and utensils for feeding pets and wash them up separately to your own dishes
- Use gloves when gardening, as soil may be contaminated by pets.

## Are there any high risk foods?

Certain foods have a greater risk of containing harmful bacteria and are best avoided – see following table.

Takeaways are best avoided; unless you can be sure they have been freshly cooked and are bought from a reputable outlet. Hot meat sandwiches, burgers and hot dogs from vans are not recommended.

When eating out ensure the meal has been freshly cooked and avoid any high risk foods – see following table.

## Where can I get more information?

If you have any questions regarding food safety and neutropaenia, please ask a member of the nursing staff or ask to speak to the dietitian.

The dietitians can be contacted on 01902 695335, 8:30am-5:00pm, Monday to Friday.

Further information on a healthy diet can be obtained from;

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

Macmillan Cancer Support is a national charity providing care and support for people living with cancer. Financial help may be available to some cancer patients. For more information ring on Freephone 0808 808 0000

89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7UQ  
[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

or

visit the Macmillan Support and Information Centre you can find us on the main hospital corridor in New Cross Hospital.

Telephone: 01902 695234

[www.cancercarewolverhampton.nhs.uk](http://www.cancercarewolverhampton.nhs.uk)

## High risk foods to avoid and suitable alternatives

Try to avoid	Safer alternatives
Raw / under-cooked eggs and foods containing raw egg e.g. egg-nog, home-made mayonnaise.	Eggs cooked until both white and yolk are solid. Commercially made mayonnaise.
Raw / under-cooked meat & poultry. Unpasteurised milk. Natural, Probiotic or Live / Bio Yoghurts. Cheese made from unpasteurised milk.	Thoroughly cooked meat & poultry. Pasteurised, sterilised or UHT milk. Most dairy products are made with pasteurised milk.
Blue veined and mould ripened soft cheeses e.g. Stilton, Danish Blue, Brie, Camembert. Fresh meat / fish / vegetable patés. Ready roasted chicken. Ice-cream from soft - whip machines.	Hard cheeses eg Cheddar, Leicester. Cream cheese, cottage cheese, cheese spread. Cans or jars of paté / paste – once opened, consume within 2 days. Fresh home-cooked chicken. Blocks of ice-cream or packaged ice-creams and lollies.
Unwashed fruit and vegetables including salads.	Wash fruit & vegetables thoroughly and peel fruit before eating.
Shellfish e.g. Oysters, mussels, prawns raw fish e.g. sushi. Bought, pre-cooked fish eg smoked salmon, smoked mackerel	Freshly cooked fresh-water and sea fish are safe.

## Notes

## English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

## Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

## Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowaliby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

## Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

## Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

## Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。