

Cytotoxic Precautions at Home

A Guide for Cancer Patients and Families



This booklet describes what you, your family, friends and caregivers need to know about cytotoxic precautions.

These precautions are used to keep your family members, friends and caregivers safe while you are taking your cancer treatment.

Your cancer treatment

You are being treated with a drug(s) called

This cancer treatment is cytotoxic. This means it can kill cancer cells and can harm healthy cells.

Your treatment container will have a sticker that says “chemotherapy” or “cytotoxic” to warn people that it could be harmful.

What are cytotoxic precautions?

Cytotoxic precautions are used to make sure that other people do not come in contact with your cancer treatment or body fluids. Although the risk is very low, it is important to be careful.

These precautions are needed when handling your cancer treatment or body fluids. Casual contact (hugging, kissing and touching) is safe.

Family, friends or caregivers who are pregnant, breastfeeding, or trying to get pregnant can be near you. But, they should use extra care to avoid contact with your cancer treatment or body fluids.

Your Nurse will tell you exactly how long to follow cytotoxic precautions. Generally, you should follow cytotoxic precautions while you are taking your cancer treatment and for two days after you finish your treatment.

What body fluids are cytotoxic?

Not all of your cancer treatment is used by your body. As your body breaks down treatment, a lot of it leaves your body in your urine. Other body fluids (such as blood, bowel movements, semen, vomit and vaginal fluids) may contain small amounts of the cancer treatment. All these fluids are cytotoxic.

How do I handle my body wastes?

You may use the toilet (septic tank or sewer) as usual. Put the lid down and then flush. Wash your hands well, with soap and water, after using the toilet.

If you use a bedpan, urinal or commode, or are vomiting in a basin, your caregiver must wear disposable gloves when emptying the wastes. Rinse any equipment with water after use. Wash it, at least once a day, with soap and water.

If you do not have control of your bladder or bowels use a disposable diaper and a plastic-backed absorbent pad to absorb urine or bowel movements. When soiled, change right away and wash skin with soap and water.

If you have an ostomy, you and your caregiver must wear disposable gloves when emptying or changing appliances.

What if my body wastes spill?

- Put on disposable gloves
- Clean up spills right away to prevent spread to other areas.
- Soak up as much of the spill as possible, using paper towels, toilet paper or disposable absorbent pads.
- Clean the area with soap and water, using paper towels/disposable cloths.
- Place soiled toilet paper in toilet, close lid, then flush.
- Place soiled paper towels, absorbent pads, disposable cloths and gloves in a plastic bag, tie it tightly. Then place the bag into another bag, tie it tightly. This bag can go out with your regular garbage.
- Wash hands with soap and water after removing gloves.

What do I do with the garbage?

Anything that may have come in contact with your body fluids or cancer treatment must be handled with care. Wear gloves when handling anything soiled.

Put things you can not flush down the toilet in a garbage bag, tie it tightly. Put this bag in a second garbage bag and tie it tightly. This bag can go out with your regular garbage.

If you are using sharps (such as needles, syringes, or IV equipment) dispose of them in a special sharps container. Sharps containers are available at your drug store. Return the container to your drug store or clinic for disposal.

Wash your hands, with soap and water, after removing and disposing of gloves.

Keep garbage out of reach of children and pets.

What about my dishes?

You do not have to wash your dishes separately.

What about laundry soiled with my body fluids?

Your caregiver should wear disposable gloves when handling laundry soiled with your body fluids. Dispose of gloves after one use and wash hands with soap and water.

Wash your soiled laundry in a load separate from other family members' laundry. If you are not washing your clothes right away, place your soiled laundry in a garbage bag, tie it tightly. Put this bag in a second garbage bag and tie it tightly.

What about sex?

Being sexually active is safe; but, care needs to be taken. It is possible for small amounts of cytotoxic drugs to be in vaginal fluid and semen during, and at least 2 days after, cancer treatment.

Use a condom when having sex (vaginal, anal or oral) to prevent body fluids from coming in contact with your partner, even if you are using other birth control methods.

Is it safe to have a baby?

No. Some types of cancer treatment and other drugs can harm unborn babies.

If either a man or a woman is taking cancer treatment, pregnancy should be avoided for at least one year. Talk with your doctor before planning a pregnancy.

Birth control pills alone may not be effective for contraception. It is important to discuss the most effective birth control method with your doctor.

Family, friends or caregivers who are pregnant, breastfeeding, or trying to get pregnant should not have contact with your cancer treatment or body fluids.

Is it safe to breastfeed?

No. Some types of cancer treatment and other drugs can be present in breast milk.

If you are breastfeeding, talk to your doctor about the risks.

How do I bring samples to the hospital?

You may need to bring urine, blood or other samples to the hospital for tests. These samples should be placed in a container with a tight fitting lid. Then place the container in a sealed bag.

If you are taking your cancer treatment at home, the following information is also important for you and your family:

How do I store my cancer treatment?

Most treatment is stored at room temperature. Keep it away from heat, sunlight and moisture. Your Cancer Care Team will tell you if your treatment needs special storage.

Keep your treatment in the original container.

- Do not put any other drugs in your cancer treatment container.
- Do not put your cancer treatment in another container.

Store your treatment in a safe place.

- Away from other family members' drugs.
- Out of the reach of children or pets.
- Away from places where food or drinks are stored or eaten.

If another person takes your treatment, call 911 or go to the Emergency Department right away.

If a pet eats your treatment, call your Vet or the Animal Emergency Clinic right away.

Return damaged, unused, discontinued, or expired cancer treatment to your drug store or hospital for disposal. Do not flush it down the toilet or throw it out in your garbage.

Ask your Cancer Care Team to explain anything you do not understand about storing your treatment.

What if I spill my cancer treatment?

If your cancer treatment is being given using an infuser system, follow the cytotoxic spill procedure you learned in the hospital/clinic. This information is also in the infuser booklet.

If you spill your pills, tablets or capsules, wear gloves to pick them up. Wash your hands with soap and water after removing and disposing of gloves.

What if I am travelling?

Talk to your nurse if you plan to travel. While you are travelling, your cancer treatment container should be stored in a Ziploc® type bag and kept at the correct temperature.

What if someone else is helping me with my treatment?

Caregivers should wear disposable gloves when giving you your treatment.

Caregivers should wash their hands with soap and water before and after giving you your treatment.

What should I do if my cancer treatment gets in my eyes?

If cancer treatment splashes into your eyes, flush them with warm water for 10 to 15 minutes. Do not use soap, or flush directly under a tap, as this may damage the eye. Remove and discard contact lenses. See an eye doctor as soon as possible.

My Questions:

This information does not take the place of the care and advice of your doctor or health care team.

Talk to your doctor or health care team about your health concerns, treatment options and any questions you have about your cancer treatment.

This booklet was adapted from “Cytotoxic Precautions: a Guide for Home”. (1999). Halifax: Capital District Health Authority.

This booklet was approved by **The Nova Scotia Cancer Patient Education Committee**, *Cancer Care Nova Scotia*, March 2014 and is to be updated every three years.

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CCNS-0001MAR 2014