

5 CAREGIVING DURING TREATMENT

Visit www.LLS.org/CaregiverWorkbook to access all chapters and worksheets.

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.

Home Changes Checklist. Check off the changes as you implement them around the home to make it more comfortable and safer for a patient who will be undergoing cancer treatment.

- 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 in and outside the tub/shower. Add a safety bar or hand grips to reduce the risk of falls.
- Find a raised toilet seat or commode.
- Use nonbreakable dishes and cups for food.

Depending on your loved one's diagnosis, treatment, and health, you may need professional help to make larger or structural changes to his or her 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. Follow these tips to prepare your loved one's home.

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

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.



Use **Worksheet 10: Grocery List** to begin with a fully stocked 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 weak. If a patient with a weakened immune system does catch a cold or an infection, his or her body will have a more difficult time fighting it compared to a healthy person.

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

- Avoid crowds and friends or family members who are sick.
- Wear a mask in crowds or in an emergency room waiting area.
- Make sure to alert the emergency room staff that this person is a cancer patient with a compromised immune system.
- 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 count, ask the healthcare team how to care for cuts the correct way.
- Avoid activities that put the patient at risk for cuts or injury.
- Practice good hygiene and personal care.
- Practice good food safety.
- Ask the healthcare team which vaccines or boosters the patient needs.
- The caregiver and other people living in the home with the patient should get a flu shot and updated vaccines, if needed, too.
- When they get the flu vaccine, 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 the dead virus. The live virus can be dangerous for immunosuppressed patients.
- If you do receive a live vaccine, you should not be near the patient for a period of time.
- 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 101°F or higher or 100.4°F for longer than an hour
- Chills
- Persistent coughing
- Tenderness at a site prone to infection, such as the area around the anus or the nasal sinuses
- A sore throat
- Pain when urinating
- Frequent diarrhea or loose bowel movements.



Use **Worksheet 9: Immunization Record.**

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 be accidentally 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 nontoxic items that most of us already have in our homes, and they make 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 deadly gases.
- 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 of 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. Here is an example of a chore chart to keep you on task.

	Done	Chore
Monday	✓	Take out the trash
	✓	Wipe down bathroom counters
	✓	Clean bathroom mirror
Tuesday	✓	Water the plants
	✓	Laundry
		Vacuum living room



Use **Worksheet 11: Chore Chart** to create your cleaning schedule.

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 maid service to clean the home. 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 on *page 3*. You may want them to use your cleaning supplies rather than cleaners bringing their own into the patient's home.

Hygiene and Personal Care. Immaculate hygiene and personal care helps to 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.

Your loved one may also need to modify his or her hygiene habits. Here are guidelines to share with your loved one.

Skin Care. Caring for the skin 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 manicures, pedicures, and artificial nails.
- Not to pick or pull at cuticles or loose skin around the nails.

Hair Care. Hair loss is a common side effect of cancer treatment. Hair loss can be upsetting and affect your loved one'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. If your loved one is dealing with hair loss, encourage him or her to

- Wash his or her hair with a mild, conditioning shampoo.
- Continue to comb his or her 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; match it to a lock of hair.
- Consider shaving his or her head or getting a short haircut before treatment begins.

Dental and Mouth Care. When treatment is not urgent, patients should visit a dentist at least 4 weeks before treatment starts. A pretreatment oral evaluation will identify problems, such as cavities, fractured teeth, loose crowns or fillings, or gum disease.

To address these problems and reduce the risk of complications during treatment

- Use a toothbrush with soft bristles to brush teeth and gums two to three times a day.
- Rinse the mouth several times a day.
- Do not use a mouthwash that contains alcohol, especially if your loved one experiences sore mouth as a side effect. Alcohol makes a sore mouth worse.
- Clean dentures well and remove them when not eating to ease the 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 also irritates the mouth.
 - Visit www.smokefree.gov for smoking and tobacco cessation resources.

TIP:

Homemade Mouthwash:
Mix ¼ teaspoon of baking soda and 1/8 teaspoon of salt in a cup of warm water.

Bisphosphonate Treatment and Dental Health. Bisphosphonates are drugs that prevent or minimize bone loss that are sometimes prescribed to blood cancer patients. Bisphosphonate treatment can cause a rare but serious side effect called “osteonecrosis of the jaw (ONJ).” Osteonecrosis of the jaw causes part of the jaw bone to die, which can lead to pain, open sores, risk of tooth loss and abscesses. Patients should have a dental checkup before starting treatment with this class of drugs and address any dental problems before treatment begins. Doctors will stop the bisphosphonate treatment if ONJ occurs.



Want more information and suggested resources? You can view, print or order the free LLS booklet *Dental and Oral Complications of Cancer Treatment Facts* at www.LLS.org/booklets or contact and Information Specialist at **(800) 955-4572**.

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—is vomiting, has diarrhea, or is sneezing—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 flea and tick medications 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, 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 benefits, too. They include companionship, improved mood, and motivation to stay active.

