Let's Talk About...

Cancer treatment, going home after

Children with cancer may have problems because of their cancer or from the cancer treatments. The information in this handout is a short version of the topics found in the *Oncology Parent Handbook*.

What does chemotherapy affect?

Chemotherapy (cancer medicine) affects all fast growing cells, both normal cells and cancer cells. The cells lining the mouth, stomach, and roots of the hairs are some cells that grow quickly. That is why hair may fall out and sores may appear in the mouth and stomach after receiving chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy also affects three important blood cells: red blood cells that carry oxygen, white blood cells that fight infection, and platelets that help stop bleeding. About seven to 10 days after chemotherapy, there will be fewer of all these cells in the body. Because your child has less blood cells, he is more likely to get an infection and may bleed more than usual.

How do I keep my child healthy?

One of the most important things to keep your child healthy is to wash your hands and have visitors wash their hands, too. Have your child wash his hands before and after eating, after using the bathroom, and after being around pets and other animals.

Your child should take a bath or shower each day.

Have your child brush his teeth after every meal and before bed.

Visitors who are feeling sick or who have had a cold or the flu should not visit. You can ask them to come back another time when they are healthy.

When blood counts are low, you should keep your child away from sick people and large crowds. This includes shopping malls, grocery stores, and church. Talk with your child's doctor about whether your child may attend school.

What are the things I need to watch for?

There are four common problems you need to watch for while your child receives cancer treatment:

- Mouth sores
- Bleeding
- Infection
- Dehydration (not enough water in the body)

What do I do if my child has mouth sores?

Sometimes, chemotherapy causes mouth sores. Your child might bleed around the gums, especially if his teeth are brushed too hard. The sores can become more irritated or infected.

- Have your child use a soft toothbrush or a Toothette® (a small sponge on a stick).
- Help your child avoid hot, spicy, or salty foods. Try cold foods like slushes or sherbet, use a straw to avoid irritating the sores, or have him drink liquids before he eats solid foods.
- If your child does not want to eat, ask your doctor about mouth numbing medicine.

How do I watch for bleeding and what do I do?

Have your child avoid rough play. Rough play may lead to an injury or bleeding. If your child has a low platelet count, it is very important that your child avoid rough play.

If your child has a cut or wound that does not stop bleeding, do the following:

- Apply direct pressure over the bleeding area with a clean towel, handkerchief, or cloth until the bleeding stops.

- If the bleeding does not stop after 15 minutes of direct pressure, call your child's doctor.

Watch for blood in your child's bowel movements, urine and vomit.

- Bowel movements that have blood in them may look red or black and tarry. Urine that has blood in it could appear pink, red, or brown. Vomit that has blood in it may be red or brown.
- If your child has blood in his bowel movements, urine, or vomit, call your child's doctor.

How do I watch for infections and what do I do?

Watch for fever. If your child has a fever, it may indicate he has an infection.

- It is best to use an electronic thermometer rather than glass because they are safer and quicker.
- Call your doctor immediately if your child has:
  - A fever of 101 F (38.3 C) or more
  - A fever of 100.4 F (38.0C) or more, for more than an hour

Watch for any of the following:

- Pain anywhere in your child's body
- Redness or swelling anywhere
- Your child looks sick
- A change in your child's behavior
- A bad cough or cold
- Diarrhea or vomiting
- A lack of energy

If your child has any of these symptoms, call your doctor immediately.

Only give your child medicine that your child's doctor approves for a specific illness.

How do I watch for chicken pox and what do I do?

Chicken pox is a common illness in children. It is spread by coughing, sneezing, and contact with the chicken pox virus. Your child was exposed to chicken pox if:

- Your child was with a child who got a chicken pox rash a day or two later.
- Your child was with a child who has a chicken pox rash.

Children being treated for cancer are at an increased risk of developing complications if he gets chicken pox. If your child is being treated for cancer, he should avoid contact with people who may be infected with chicken pox. Avoid being exposed to chicken pox, even if your child has been immunized. Children who have had chicken pox, can develop an infection called shingles.

If your child develops chicken pox or shingles or if they are exposed to a child with chicken pox. Call your care team.

If you think your child was exposed to chicken pox, call the clinic right away.

How do I watch for dehydration?

Dehydration (dee-high-DRAY-shun or not enough body fluids) is always a concern. Dehydration can be from vomiting or diarrhea. In these cases the body loses fluid and minerals. See the handout ***Let's Talk About… Dehydration and diarrhea*** for complete instructions on how to take care of your child at home while he has diarrhea.

Watch for these things:

- Sunken eyes
- Sunken soft spot on top of a baby's head
- Dry mouth and tongue
- No tears
- No urine in 12-18 hours
- Unusual sleepiness or tiredness

If you think your child has dehydration:

- Give him clear liquids (like water, Gatorade®, clear broth) but do not force him to drink.
- Change your child's diet slowly so he's eating more and more normal foods. Give him more soft and then change to more solid foods.
- Try giving small amounts of fluid at a time (½ ounce or ¼ of a measuring cup). You may want to use small cups to prevent overwhelming your child.

- Call the oncology clinic if you think your child may be dehydrated. Dehydration is serious. In some cases, a child must go to the hospital.

How do I contact the clinic and who do I call when the clinic is closed?

Contact the Primary Children's Oncology Clinic at 801.662.4700 on Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Other hours, call the hospital operator at 801.662.1000. Ask to speak with the oncologist on call.

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Pediatric Education Services, 801.662.3500 | Rev. 07/13, LTA520407535 | *Available in Spanish*