The Effect of the Neutropenic Diet in the Outpatient Setting: A Pilot Study

Debra DeMille, MS, RD, LDN, Priscilla Deming, MSN, RN, Paul Lupinacci, PhD, and Linda A. Jacobs, PhD, RN

Key Points . . .

➤ The role of the neutropenic diet in preventing infections in patients receiving chemotherapy is controversial.
➤ No standard definition of the neutropenic diet exists.
➤ Further evidence-based study is necessary to determine the most effective dietary approach for neutropenia and avoid unnecessary dietary restrictions.

Purpose/Objectives: To determine whether use of the neutropenic diet in the outpatient setting decreases the number of febrile admissions and positive blood cultures associated with chemotherapy-induced neutropenia.

Design: Descriptive pilot study.

Setting: Outpatient chemotherapy unit of a medical center in a major metropolitan area.

Sample: Convenience sample of 28 patients aged 33–67 years beginning treatment with 1 of 13 chemotherapy regimens.

Methods: Twelve-week prospective study beginning on day 1 of chemotherapy cycle 1. Patients received instructions regarding the neutropenic diet before starting chemotherapy. Adherence assessment telephone calls were made at weeks 6 and 12. Hospital admission charts were reviewed at study completion.

Main Research Variables: Adherence with neutropenic diet, number of febrile admissions, and number of positive blood cultures.

Findings: Sixteen patients were compliant with the neutropenic diet, four of which were admitted for neutropenia with gram-negative rods. No significant differences were found in the rates of febrile admissions or positive blood cultures between compliant and noncompliant patients.

Conclusions: Clinical significance in this pilot study is related to the time required for diet education, content of diet education regarding food restrictions, and difficulty adhering to diet requirements given the multitude of side effects (e.g., nausea, vomiting, mouth sores, diarrhea) of chemotherapy.

Implications for Nursing: No clear evidence exists that the neutropenic diet makes a difference in overall rates of infection. Nursing research to compare the neutropenic diet with a less restrictive food safety education-focused diet is needed to guide clinical practice.

Cancer treatment has evolved, and a majority of chemotherapy regimens now are administered in the outpatient setting. The advent of high-technology homecare, growth factors, and improved antibiotic therapy have contributed to the transition. In-depth patient education related to chemotherapy drugs, schedules, and potential side effects as well as diligent postchemotherapy symptom management are significant components of the chemotherapy process. The goals of these practices are to prevent or minimize side effects experienced by patients receiving chemotherapy and aggressively manage symptoms as they occur.

One major side effect of chemotherapy is the development of infection as a result of neutropenia, or lowering of the white blood cell count that results from damage to the bone marrow and severe marrow suppression. The most important value to monitor is the number of bacteria-fighting blood cells (i.e., neutrophils), referred to as the absolute neutrophil count (ANC). Most patients with an ANC higher than 500 per cubic millimeter (mm³) of blood do not develop major infections. Once the ANC drops below 500/mm³, the chance of developing an infection increases significantly. When ANC values are higher than 1,000/mm³, infection risk is reduced significantly (Baehner, 2004). Variation among patients is common, however, and although some patients with ANCs far above 500/mm³ will develop infections, others with ANCs below 500/mm³ will remain infection-free.

Neutropenia occurs in many patients undergoing outpatient chemotherapy and is the most significant risk factor identified in patients with infections. Patients’ risk of infection is related to the severity and duration of neutropenia (Brandt, 1990; Carter, 1993; Gaytan-Martinez et al., 2000; Greifzu, 1991; Pizzo, 1984). The white blood cell count is at its lowest point (i.e., nadir) within 10–14 days of beginning chemotherapy.

Debra DeMille, MS, RD, LDN, is a nutrition counselor in the Joan Kurnell Cancer Center at the Pennsylvania Hospital and Priscilla Deming, MSN, RN, is an oncology clinical nurse specialist in the Department of Hematology-Oncology at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, both in Philadelphia; Paul Lupinacci, PhD, is an assistant professor of statistics in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Villanova University in Pennsylvania; and Linda A. Jacobs, PhD, RN, is the director of the Lance Armstrong Foundation Living Well After Cancer Program in the Abramson Cancer Center at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. The research for this article was funded by the ONS Foundation through an unrestricted grant from Amgen Inc. (Submitted July 2004. Accepted for publication March 17, 2005.)

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