Neutropenia

It's been just over a year since Cynthia Vega was told she has stage four breast cancer: When she was diagnosed, the cancer had already spread to her bones.

> *"I thought I had a shoulder injury on my right shoulder. And I went to a shoulder specialist. And then after doing an X-ray, MRI, he realized it was a tumor."*-Cynthia, Patient

Today, there may be no better testament to the success of Cynthia's treatment than the sport she chose to take up: archery. Cynthia's 'a rightie.'

> *"If someone would have told me a year ago that I would have access to my shoulder, I wouldn't have believed them. I really thought the step for me was going to be losing my entire right arm."*-Cynthia, Patient

A combination of radiation, chemotherapy, and hormone therapy brought the cancer under control and has given Cynthia her life back. But the treatment also weakened her immune system, which fights off germs that can make us sick.

> *"When we give anti-cancer treatment, we sometimes see a decrease in what we call the white blood cell count."*-Dr. Ruth Oratz, MD, Oncologist

When your white blood cell level drops too low, it's called "Neutropenia", because "Neutrophils", a particular type of white blood cell made by your bone marrow, are affected. Neutropenia increases your risk of serious infections.

> *"The single most important thing that you can do to help prevent getting an infection – is washing your hands. You may also want to make sure that your environment is clean and hygienic. Ask your doctor if you need to take special precautions."*- Dr. Ruth Oratz, MD, Oncologist

> *"I had to basically, uh, not eat raw foods, like sushi; no raw meats; everything had to be well-, well-cooked to make sure that I didn't get sick."*-Cynthia, Patient

That's because cooking foods like meat, poultry, fish, and eggs *thoroughly* kills off any bacteria that can make you sick. You also may need to scrub raw fruits and vegetables more than usual to get rid of germs.

> *"If we anticipate significant neutropenia, for prolonged periods of time, we may recommend precautions that are a little bit more intensive about protecting against infection."*- Dr. Ruth Oratz, MD, Oncologist

For example – to prevent skin infections: Be very careful not to cut yourself. If you do get a cut, clean the wound right away with soap and warm water, and cover it with a bandage. You may be prescribed medication that helps ward off neutropenia by stimulating bone marrow to make more white blood cells.

> *"This medicine is terrific at really preventing serious neutropenia, and the infections that could be caused by that."*- Dr. Ruth Oratz, MD, Oncologist

Still, regardless of the precautions you take, keep an eye out for signs of potential infection, including fever: a temperature of 100.4 or higher, chills or sweating, redness, pain, swelling, or a sudden warm feeling around an IV injection site or any sore.

> *"If you have an infection, we wanna know about it, and make sure that we evaluate it, and treat you promptly."*- Dr. Ruth Oratz, MD, Oncologist

Cynthia's current treatment puts her at less risk of neutropenia than she was before. But she's still aiming to protect herself.

> *"It is hard, it is more time-consuming, you have to be more cautious. But you know if you think of the alternative, of getting extremely sick, and being stuck in a hospital, for making these few adjustments in your life, and in your daily schedule will help."*-Cynthia, Patient

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