Infection Prevention after Organ Transplant

The medicines you take to prevent organ rejection make it harder for the body to fight infections. If you have any signs or symptoms of infection, you should call your doctor and transplant coordinator to get treatment started as soon as possible. Some infections may require hospital treatment.

Ways to Prevent Infection

- Practice good hygiene. Shower or bathe and wash your hair each day.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Be sure to wash after sneezing, coughing, using the toilet, before and after handling food and any time your hands are dirty.
- Do not eat food or consume drinks prepared from unpasteurized milk, fruit or vegetable juices. Avoid eating raw or undercooked eggs, meat, poultry, fish or seafood, as well as soft cheeses like feta, brie or camembert. For more information, read the handout Nutrition and Diet after Transplant or Immunocompromised Diet.
- Avoid use of well water if possible, and do not swim in or drink water from freshwater lakes, rivers or pools.
- Take care of cuts, sores or scratches. Clean any cut or scratch with soap and water or an antiseptic like hydrogen peroxide. Keep the site clean and dry by covering it with a band-aid or other dressing.
- Stay away from sick people. Be very careful around any children who may be sick.
- Wear gloves and a mask for gardening. Ideally use an FDA approved N-95 mask. These can be purchased in any hardware or household goods store. Remove houseplants since they carry molds.

- Have someone clean up after pets in the home such as a dog or cat. **Do not clean the litter box.** Birds, reptiles, amphibians, and small rodents such as, mice, gerbils, and hamsters carry many germs that can be life threatening to someone with a transplant. You may need to find a new home for them. Talk to your transplant coordinator to be sure it is safe for you to have any pet around.

- You may be told to wear a mask during your first 6 months after transplant when you need to come to the hospital or be in large crowds.

- If planning to travel outside the country, please notify your transplant coordinator as soon as possible to ensure you receive appropriate vaccinations and medications that help prevent infections depending on your destination.

**Types of Infections**

Infections can be caused by different kinds of germs called viruses, bacteria, parasites, or fungi. Here are some common infections in transplant recipients:

- **Cytomegalovirus, or CMV,** is caused by a virus. The risk for CMV is highest the first 3 months after your transplant. Signs may include fever, muscle weakness, fatigue and shortness of breath. Joint pain, vision changes, headaches and abdominal pain are other signs. Treatment may require IV or oral medicines for weeks or months.

- **BK viral nephritis or BK,** is caused by a virus. The risk for BK is highest at the end of the first year of transplant, but can happen anytime between 6 months and 5 years. The virus causes the tubes in the kidneys that drain urine to the bladder to swell. Urine can be blocked. Signs may include: blood in urine, hard to urinate, rise in BUN or creatinine in lab work. People otherwise feel well and do not have the kinds of symptoms one expects with a viral infection.

- **Shingles** is caused by a virus known as **herpes zoster.** It often starts as a rash or small water blisters on the skin of the chest, back or hip. The rash may or may not be painful or itchy. It may occur in people who had chicken pox at a younger age. The vaccine for shingles should be
avoided after a transplant since it contains live virus that could make you sick.

- **Chicken pox** is caused by a virus called *varicella zoster*. This often shows as a rash or small blisters. **If you have been exposed to someone with chicken pox and you did not have chicken pox at a younger age, call your transplant coordinator right away.**

- **Candida** is the fungus that causes a common yeast infection. In the mouth or throat, it is called thrush. This infection often starts in the mouth or throat but it may cause a wound or vaginal infection. Candida can show as white patches on the tongue or cheeks and may cause pain, problems with swallowing. Women may have vaginal infections that cause yellow or white discharge and itching.

- **Wound infections** often are caused by bacteria. Fever and redness, swelling, tenderness or drainage from your surgery wound are signs of a wound infection. You should call your transplant coordinator immediately if you experience any of these symptoms. Antibiotics and sometimes surgery are used for treatment.

- **Pneumocystis jiroveci** – When a person has a weak immune system, this germ can cause a type of life-threatening pneumonia called PCP. A dry cough and fever are common signs. You will be prescribed an antibiotic if you have this condition. If you think you have the flu or a cold that is not getting better, call your transplant coordinator.

- **Be careful to avoid anyone who is sick with childhood or infectious diseases.** Measles, mumps and tuberculosis are some of the diseases that may cause you severe problems if you were to get exposed when your immune system is weak.

Talk to your doctor or transplant coordinator about your risk for infections. You may need to take added precautions.

- Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.