

Mail Today

Winter blues for cancer patients

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in New Delhi

MOST of us associate winter with better health and high energy levels, but for cancer patients the season brings extra trouble.

Cancer and its treatment, such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy, can weaken the immune system. This can make patients more susceptible to illness caused by cold and dry weather. The best way to ward off such risks is to take extra precaution during the season.

Weaken immune system poses a high risk of flu, which is common in winter and can lead to serious illness. "Cancer patients are more prone to infections. During winter, infection rates increase by 15 to 20 per cent," said Dr Amit Bhargava, consultant oncologist, Max Healthcare. Reducing the risk of flu is the first and foremost advice doctors give to cancer patients during the winter. A flu vaccine is the best way to do this for everyone except those undergoing chemotherapy.

There's no medicine for hypothermia

Hypothermia, a side-effect of chemotherapy in which the body cannot produce enough heat to stay warm, is another condition to be guarded against. Some medications and medical conditions caused by cancer or its treatment can interfere with the body's ability to adjust its temperature.

People who are less physically active may have reduced blood flow, which can lead to hypothermia. Those having a low amount of body fat may also be at high risk. Dehydration, which itself is a common side-effect of cancer treatment, can also increase the risk.

There are no specific medicines to control hypothermia and general precautions such as keeping the body and head well-covered should be observed.

People being treated for cancer may get frostbite if they have developed side-effects of the treatment, such as peripheral neuropathy — a nerve disorder that cause them to be less sensi-



SIDE-EFFECTS

- Hypothermia: A condition in which body cannot produce enough heat to stay warm
- Dehydration
- Bone complications
- Dry or cracked skin
- Frostbite: Can occur if treatment leads to side-effects such as peripheral neuropathy, a nerve disorder that causes patients to be less sensitive to temperature extremes

CAUTION IS THE KEY

The disease and treatment weakens immune system, making patients susceptible to illness caused by cold



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- Do not step out when the temperature is very low and there's high wind or rain
- Spend at least 15 minutes in the sun every day
- When stepping outside, wear gloves or mittens, a scarf to cover the head, neck and face, and dress in layers
- Keep your head covered even when you are indoors. This is especially important if chemotherapy or radiation therapy has caused hair loss
- Get a flu shot, but those who are undergoing chemotherapy should avoid it

- If the side-effects of cancer treatment, such as hot flashes or vomiting, have caused sweating, change clothes and bed-sheets often to stay warm and dry
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Eat foods such as cheese and yogurt that are fortified with vitamin D, and a nutritious diet comprising of multivitamins. But avoid vitamins C and E as they interfere with the impact of chemotherapy
- Those undergoing radiation therapy should keep the skin hydrated by avoiding long baths, using gentle soaps and applying moisturising lotions



tive to temperature extremes. This occurs in extremely cold temperatures, causing the skin and underlying tissue to freeze. Frostbite most commonly occurs in fingers, toes, nose and ears and the skin becomes firm, pale, waxy and numb. Cancer and therapy may also increase the risk of bone complications. The best way to protect against these is to have a healthy intake of Vitamin D. Cancer patients should spend at least 10-15 minutes daily in the sun, which is the best source of this vitamin. Eating Vitamin D-rich food and taking vitamin supplements in consultation with the doctor can also be done to strengthen the bones. Finally, those undergoing radiation therapy need to guard against dry or cracked skin, which occurs in this season when humidity drops. The skin should be kept hydrated by avoiding excessive exposure to sun and long baths, using gentle soaps, applying moisturising lotions and drinking plenty of water.

Patients face a high risk of frostbite

Apart from those suffering from cancer, heart patients, too, must take extra care of their health as heart attacks are likely to occur in winter. "This happens because the blood platelets are more sticky and vessels more prone to constriction in the cold," said Dr Praveer Agarwal, interventional cardiologist at Escorts Heart Institute. Cardiac patients need to avoid exposure to extreme cold by covering themselves well in woollens and going outdoors only when the sun is out. Another precaution to be observed is to avoid exertion after meals.

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