



International Journal of Advance Research in Nursing

Volume 9; Issue 1; January 2026; Page No. 17-21

Received: 08-10-2025

Accepted: 14-11-2025

Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal

Nursing management of neutropenia in oncology patients: A comprehensive review

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/nursing.2026.v9.i1.A.620>

Abstract

Neutropenia is a frequent, potentially life-threatening complication of cancer treatment that significantly increases infection risk, causes febrile neutropenia (FN), and leads to chemotherapy dose reductions and treatment delays. Nurses are central to prevention, early detection, prompt management of FN, patient/family education, and coordination of multidisciplinary care. This review synthesizes current evidence and clinical guidelines to present an in-depth nursing framework for assessment, prevention, and management of neutropenia in oncology patients. Key interventions include risk stratification, routine ANC monitoring, infection prevention bundles, timely use of granulocyte colony-stimulating factors (G-CSFs) per guideline recommendations, rapid management of febrile neutropenia with empiric antimicrobials, nutritional and psychosocial support, and ongoing education. Practical care plans, monitoring checklists, and recommendations for clinical practice and research are provided.

Keywords: Neutropenia, febrile neutropenia, oncology nursing, G-CSF, infection prevention

Introduction

Neutropenia - commonly defined as an absolute neutrophil count (ANC) < 1, 500 cells/ μ L and severe neutropenia as ANC < 500 cells/ μ L - is a major dose-limiting toxicity of cytotoxic chemotherapy and is associated with significant morbidity and mortality in oncology patients [1-3]. Febrile neutropenia (FN), the combination of fever with neutropenia, is an oncologic emergency requiring prompt recognition and empiric therapy; FN contributes to hospitalizations, treatment delays, increased healthcare costs, and, in some cases, mortality [2, 3, 6]. Nurses are at the frontline for recognizing early signs, executing prophylactic and therapeutic interventions, educating patients and families, and coordinating timely multidisciplinary responses - roles substantiated by international guidelines (ASCO, ESMO, IDSA) and recent nursing research [2, 3, 5, 11, 12]. This review integrates guideline recommendations, evidence from clinical trials and meta-analyses, and nursing best practices to provide a detailed, practical resource for oncology nursing practice.

Epidemiology & impact

Reported incidence of chemotherapy-associated neutropenia varies by regimen intensity, tumor type, and patient factors; FN occurs in up to 20% of patients receiving myelosuppressive chemotherapy and carries a variable mortality (historically up to 10% in some series, higher in those with comorbidities or septic shock) [13, 22]. Beyond immediate infection risk, neutropenia frequently leads to chemotherapy dose reductions or delays, which may compromise cancer control and survival outcomes.

Economic burden includes hospital admissions, antimicrobial therapy, and additional supportive care resources [7, 24].

Pathophysiology

Neutrophils are generated in the bone marrow from myeloblast progenitors; cytotoxic chemotherapy damages rapidly dividing progenitor cells, causing a nadir in neutrophil count typically 7-14 days after administration depending on regimen [4]. Radiation to marrow-containing sites further suppresses hematopoiesis. Some malignancies infiltrate marrow, and certain drugs (e.g., alkylators, antimetabolites) are particularly myelotoxic. The resultant neutrophil deficiency impairs innate immune defenses, especially against bacterial pathogens and fungi.

Risk stratification: Identifying high-risk patients

Risk stratification helps target prophylactic interventions (e.g., G-CSF) and surveillance. Key risk factors include:

- Myelotoxic chemotherapy regimens (expected FN risk $\geq 20\%$).
- Age > 65 years.
- Prior episodes of FN or documented prolonged neutropenia.
- Comorbidities (renal, hepatic dysfunction, uncontrolled diabetes, cardiopulmonary disease).
- Poor nutritional status, baseline cytopenias, advanced disease or marrow involvement.
- Concomitant immunosuppressants or corticosteroids.

Guideline recommendations specify primary prophylaxis

with G-CSF where FN risk (from regimen + patient factors) is high; otherwise consider secondary prophylaxis after an FN episode [5, 24].

Clinical presentation and early warning signs

Because neutropenic patients may have muted inflammatory responses, even subtle signs warrant immediate evaluation. Typical and atypical findings include:

- Fever (single oral temp $> 38.3^{\circ}\text{C}$ or sustained $> 38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$ for 1 hour) - often the earliest indicator of infection/FN.
- Chills, rigors (may be absent), new cough, dyspnea, sore throat, mucositis, dysuria.
- Localized erythema, induration at catheter or wound sites.
- New onset confusion or hypotension (late signs of sepsis).

Nurses must treat any fever as potentially serious and act per institutional FN pathways [2, 3, 6, 10].

Diagnostic evaluation & initial nursing actions

Immediate actions when FN is suspected (nursing priorities):

1. Triage and rapid assessment of airway/breathing/circulation; evaluate hemodynamic stability.
2. Obtain vital signs and pulse oximetry; assess mental status.
3. Obtain bedside fingerstick glucose (hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia may complicate care).
4. Draw blood cultures (from peripheral and any central lines) before antibiotics if feasible and without delaying therapy beyond recommended time window.
5. Collect urine, sputum or wound cultures as indicated.
6. Notify the treating oncologist/physician and activate FN protocol.
7. Ensure vascular access and prepare for immediate empiric IV antibiotics (ideally within 60 minutes in stable patients; sooner if unstable).
8. Baseline laboratory tests: CBC with differential, renal and liver function, lactate if sepsis suspected.
9. Arrange chest radiograph for respiratory symptoms or abnormal exam.

Nurses are instrumental in executing this time-sensitive bundle and documenting time points to meet “door-to-antibiotic” benchmarks recommended in guidelines [2, 3, 23].

Evidence-Based Therapeutic Interventions

Empiric Antimicrobial Therapy

Guidelines recommend prompt empiric broad-spectrum IV antibiotics with antipseudomonal coverage for high-risk FN; choices include ceftazidime, piperacillin-tazobactam, or a carbapenem depending on local resistance patterns and allergy history [3, 21]. Local antibiograms should guide empiric selection; infectious disease consultation is recommended for complex or refractory cases. Nurses ensure timely administration, monitor for infusion reactions, and support therapeutic drug monitoring when required.

Role of G-CSF (Filgrastim, Pegfilgrastim)

G-CSFs reduce the duration and severity of neutropenia,

incidence of FN, and hospitalizations in high-risk patients, and their use is recommended for primary prophylaxis when the FN risk is ~20% or higher or where patient-specific factors elevate risk [5, 24]. Secondary prophylaxis with G-CSF is advised following a prior FN episode if treatment intent is curative and dose intensity is critical. Nursing responsibilities include administration (timing often 24-72 hours after chemotherapy per product guidance), monitoring for bone pain and injection-site reactions, and patient teaching about self-administration for outpatient regimens.

Antimicrobial Prophylaxis

In selected high-risk patients (particularly those with prolonged, profound neutropenia), antibacterial, antifungal, or antiviral prophylaxis reduces certain infections; however, prophylactic strategies must weigh benefits against resistance and adverse effects [3, 9]. Nurses monitor adherence and educate patients regarding signs of breakthrough infection.

Infection prevention: Nursing bundles and best practices

Nursing-led infection prevention bundles reduce infection incidence and improve outcomes. Core elements include:

- Strict hand hygiene for staff, patients, and visitors - single most effective measure.
- Environmental controls: clean rooms, routine disinfection of high-touch surfaces, restriction of plants/flowers and raw food items.
- Aseptic technique for all invasive procedures and central venous catheter care; use of chlorhexidine for skin antisepsis and daily review of catheter necessity.
- Oral care protocols to reduce mucositis and local infection risk (regular mouth rinsing, soft toothbrushes, topical agents as needed).
- Patient cohorting and visitor screening during community infection outbreaks (e.g., influenza season).
- Education on food safety (avoidance of raw meats, unpasteurized dairy, and unwashed produce).

Multiple studies and institutional policies demonstrate that nursing adherence to these interventions reduces infection events in neutropenic patients [11, 14, 23].

Nursing assessment tools & monitoring schedule

A structured monitoring schedule supports early detection:

- **Pre-chemotherapy baseline:** CBC with differential, renal & hepatic panel, nutritional assessment, comorbidity screening.
- **During nadir period (typically days 7-14 after many regimens):** Daily symptom check, temperature every 4-6 hours (or home monitoring), repeat CBC as indicated.
- **Post-discharge/outpatient follow-up:** Clear instructions for fever reporting, contact numbers, expected nadir timing, and when to present to ER.

A sample nursing observation checklist (for inpatient setting):

- Temp q4h; document any $>38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$.
- Monitor ANC trend: baseline, nadir, recovery.
- Inspect catheter sites q shift.
- Oral mucosa inspection q shift; implement oral care

- every 8 hours.
- Skin integrity checks; wound dressing assessment.
- Intake/output and hydration status.
- Pain assessment and management (particularly for bone pain from G-CSF).

These routine measures should be integrated into electronic health record flowsheets for consistency.

Patient education & self-management

Patient and caregiver education is one of the highest-impact nursing interventions. Education topics should be standardized, documented, and reinforced at each encounter:

- Recognize and act on fever: immediate contact and presentation if $\geq 38.0^{\circ}\text{C}$.
- Hand hygiene and avoidance of crowded or poorly ventilated spaces during nadir.
- Food safety rules and avoidance of high-risk items.
- Skin and oral care techniques; when to call for mouth pain or ulcers.
- Correct use and timing of G-CSF injections and common side effects (bone pain, injection site soreness).
- Safe wound and catheter care; when to seek immediate advice for redness or discharge.
- Medication adherence and keeping scheduled lab appointments.

Use teach-back methods, written handouts, and if available, telehealth for remote temperature monitoring and follow-up.

Psychosocial support and quality of life considerations

Isolation precautions, frequent hospital visits, and the anxiety of potential infections negatively affect quality of life. Nurses should provide psychosocial support, facilitate peer support groups, liaise with social work for access to resources (transport, finances), and incorporate mental health screening and referral when needed. Psychoeducation can reduce fear and increase adherence to safety measures [12].

Outpatient management & telehealth

Shifting low-risk FN management to outpatient care may reduce hospital burden and improve patient comfort; however, careful risk assessment is required using validated tools (e.g., MASCC score) to designate low vs high risk [6, 2]. Telehealth check-ins and home temperature monitors improve early detection of fever and support timely interventions. Nurses play a central role in triage for outpatient vs inpatient management and in delivering remote education and follow-up.

Implementation challenges and barriers

Common barriers to optimal neutropenia management include:

- Variability in guideline adherence across centers and regions.
- Resource constraints limiting availability of G-CSF or rapid access to empiric antibiotics.
- Gaps in nursing knowledge or confidence in FN protocols (studies report variable nursing knowledge on

chemotherapy-induced neutropenia).

- Antimicrobial resistance patterns that complicate empiric therapy choices.

Addressing these requires institutional policies, nurse education programs, access to essential medications, and antimicrobial stewardship collaboration [9, 11, 16].

Evidence summary & key guideline recommendations

- **G-CSF prophylaxis:** Recommended for regimens/patients with FN risk $\sim 20\%$ or higher (ASCO). Secondary prophylaxis after prior FN is recommended in selected cases to maintain chemotherapy dose intensity [5, 24].
- **Empiric antimicrobials:** Start broad-spectrum antipseudomonal IV antibiotics promptly for high-risk FN (IDSA/ESMO). Collect cultures before antibiotics if possible but do not delay therapy beyond target timeframes [3, 2, 21].
- **Infection prevention:** Nursing infection control bundles (hand hygiene, aseptic catheter care, oral care, food precautions) reduce infection incidence and are essential components of care [11, 14].
- **Time targets:** Aim for antibiotic administration within 60 minutes of triage for febrile neutropenia in hemodynamically stable patients; sooner if unstable or septic [23].

These statements are supported by clinical practice guidelines and systematic reviews [2, 3, 5, 21, 23].

Nursing education, protocols & competency

To ensure consistent, high-quality care, institutions should:

- Maintain evidence-based, locally adapted FN pathways and standing orders.
- Provide mandatory nurse competencies on FN recognition and emergency response (simulation drills recommended).
- Ensure availability of easy-to-use patient education materials in local languages.
- Integrate electronic alerts for ANC trends and nadir periods into EHRs.

Education programs improve nurse knowledge and patient outcomes [9, 11, 12].

Research gaps & future directions

Priority areas for research include:

- Evaluating nurse-led outpatient FN management models and safety across diverse settings.
- Impact of telehealth and remote monitoring devices on FN outcomes and health resource utilization.
- Optimal antimicrobial de-escalation strategies in FN to reduce antimicrobial exposure while maintaining safety.
- Implementation science studies on improving guideline adherence and nurse competencies, especially in low/middle-income settings.
- Cost-effectiveness analyses of expanded G-CSF use versus hospitalization costs.

Addressing these questions will refine nursing interventions

and optimize resource allocation [17, 22].

Practical recommendations for clinical practice

- Assess:** Baseline FN risk for every patient before initiating cytotoxic therapy.
- Prophylaxis:** Use G-CSF for high-risk regimens/patients per ASCO/ESMO recommendations.
- Monitor:** Provide clear nadir-period surveillance plans; perform frequent temperature and symptom checks.
- Act Fast:** Treat any fever in a neutropenic patient as an emergency - obtain cultures and start empiric IV antibiotics promptly.
- Prevent:** Implement and audit nursing infection prevention bundles (hand hygiene, catheter care, oral care, food safety).
- Educate:** Teach patients/caregivers to recognize fever and follow the action plan; use teach-back.
- Document:** Record time of fever detection, cultures, and antibiotic administration to meet quality metrics.
- Coordinate:** Involve multidisciplinary team early (oncology, ID, pharmacy, dietetics, social work).

Conclusion

Neutropenia in oncology patients remains a clinically important complication with substantial consequences for patients and health systems. Nurses are essential to prevention, early detection, evidence-based management of febrile neutropenia, and patient education. Adherence to guideline-based interventions (G-CSF prophylaxis when indicated, rapid empiric antibiotics for FN, and strict infection prevention measures), robust nurse education, standardized protocols, and interdisciplinary collaboration are the pillars of optimal care. Future research should focus on outpatient models, telehealth, antimicrobial stewardship, and implementation strategies to further improve outcomes.

Conflict of Interest

Not available.

Financial Support

Not available.

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How to Cite This Article

Joseph JM. Nursing management of neutropenia in oncology patients: A comprehensive review. *International Journal of Advance Research in Nursing*. 2026;9(1):17-21.

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