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When Germs Become Killers: Unearthing a Plan to Keep Germs Away from a Cancer Patient

Germs are everywhere, and honestly, we should all practice a little bit of "germaphobic" behavior. Everything you touch within your home or outside of your home is possibly covered in germs. A person with a normal immune system has the resistance to fend off most germs, but a cancer patient often does not.

Winston-Salem, NC (January 2010)—This flu season, H1N1 has heightened germ awareness around the world. Let's face it—we all need to be more germ-conscious. But when you are a cancer patient or the caregiver of one, every germ has the potential to cause a fatal infection. One single germ could change everything in the life or death struggle for someone who is battling cancer, whether the patient has a low white blood cell count or not.

Author Joni Aldrich has plenty of advice for germ fighting strategies. In 2005, her husband Gordon went through three *outpatient* stem cell transplants before he lost his two-year battle with cancer. Her book, *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, $19.95) tells the story of the Aldrich family's experiences and offers valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer. One chapter provides practical advice for caregivers in regard to keeping germs away from the cancer patient.

"Imagine living in a forty-foot motor home with a neutropenic (very low white blood cell count) cancer patient and three cats for long periods of time," reflects Aldrich. "Yet, somehow I got Gordon through the worst of his cancer treatments. But it wasn't easy; I had to constantly be on guard against germ attacks."

Once organisms like bacteria, viruses, fungi, and protozoa invade a body, they can stay for a while. These germs draw energy from their host and may damage or destroy healthy cells. As they use up the body's nutrients and energy, most will produce waste products known as toxins. Some toxins cause symptoms of common colds or flu-like infections, such as a runny nose, sneezing, coughing, or diarrhea, but they can also cause high fever, increased heart rate, and life-threatening illnesses.

"Unfortunately, cancer patients can't walk around in a protective 'bubble.' And they have to be out and about going to treatments and medical appointments," says Aldrich. "Thus, patient and caregiver must be constantly on guard against the germs that healthy humans simply bypass through their normal immune systems."

Read on for some of Aldrich's recommendations for protecting cancer patients from germs:

- **Be aware of your surroundings out in public and at home.** If people come into your perimeter with signs or symptoms of sickness, quickly take evasive action. A simple cough or sneeze can spread germs everywhere. "If you can, move to a different location or seat," notes Aldrich. "But this is not always possible. You may need to politely ask the other person to move. My Southern upbringing makes it difficult to be rude, but sometimes you have to be. At home, when people visit and show signs of illness, politely ask them to come back when they're better. Hand shaking may be the oldest form of greeting, but don't do it. Always try to be conscious about keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth."
- **You have to be even more concerned in medical facilities!** According to the Global Crisis Solution Center, "Hundreds of thousands of people who enter the hospital as patients are dying from germs picked up in the hospital regardless of the reason they were hospitalized." Aldrich states, "This report is exactly why Gordon's stem cell transplants were done on an outpatient basis, and why more and more cancer centers are now in separate buildings away from the main hospital. And don't get me started on emergency rooms—these are the last place you want your cancer patient. If a crisis makes it absolutely necessary (your cancer center may tell you to come there instead), make sure the patient wears a mask and notify the check-in staff immediately upon arrival that your patient has cancer and a low white blood cell count. If you must wait, have the patient wait in the car."

- **Watch out for germs in unlikely places.** “It’s not the most uplifting thought, but—if you were a germ—where would you be? Often, it’s on objects and surfaces that you take for granted—including the money that you exchange every day. Think about the bottom of purses, backpacks, and briefcases. We set them on the floor of restaurants, restrooms, and high-traffic offices every day, then turn around and put them on our kitchen counters! They’re breeding grounds for germs and bacteria. The same thing goes for the bottom of your shoes, so ask visitors to remove them in your home’s entryway. And if you buy clothes—whether they’re from a designer or a thrift store—wash them before the patient wears them. If you receive prayer shawls, blankets, or other warm gifts, wash them, too. Be aware when using handrails and escalators, and even bathroom soap dispensers and hand-dryers. Always carry around your own pen, and use it to sign paperwork or receipts—especially in doctors’ offices and pharmacies.”
- **Disinfect your hands and surroundings often.** At home, wipe down doorknobs, stair rails, remote controls, and light switches. That won’t help you when you’re in a public restroom. “Keep hand sanitizers and disinfecting wipes with you at all times,” advises Aldrich. “Buy them by the mega-boxes. Be aware of all surfaces where germs may hide. If the patient’s white blood count is low, open doors with a wipe in your hand.”
- **If you have children, set up a germ fighting station.** Make it fun. Have disinfecting wipes ready as they enter the house. Make it a rule that they remove their shoes in the foyer and switch to indoor shoes. Educating your kids about germ awareness is good for everyone.
- **Phones and computer keyboards are the worst!** “I got my first case of strep throat from a phone,” reflects Aldrich. “Since then, I have hated using anyone else’s phone or computer. If it’s absolutely necessary, I wipe the buttons and keyboards gently with disinfectant wipes or a give them a thin rub of hand sanitizer or rubbing alcohol. This used to drive Gordon crazy, because he was afraid of the damage to the electronics. I cared only about his well-being.”
- **Be careful when preparing food for a cancer patient.** All regular sanitation rules apply with more vigilance, whether in your own home or for others preparing food for the family. What is the sanitation grade of your favorite restaurant? “When Gordon was going through his stem cell transplants, they cautioned us to throw leftovers away after two days,” says Aldrich. “Be particularly aware while preparing and cooking seafood

and poultry. Make sure that fruits and raw vegetables are washed properly. Gordon never minded leaving off the salads. Personally, I never eat any of the mayonnaise-based salads at salad bars, because you never know how long they've been out. And no pot luck dinners!" Here are the top 10 riskiest foods: Leafy greens, eggs, tuna, oysters, potatoes, cheese, ice cream, tomatoes, sprouts, and berries.

- **Everything including the kitchen sink.** "Recent studies have shown that there may be more germs in your kitchen sink that in your toilet bowl or garbage can! It is recommended that you clean your sink daily with bleach and water, but the smell of cleaning products can bother the cancer patient. It's a continuous balancing act."
- **Wash towels and sponges often.** And beware the sponge! These naturally harbor germs, so replace them every day or so. Run a cycle of bleach and water through your washing machine regularly to prevent excess mold build-up in the pipes or hoses.
- **Beware pet germs.** Pets are great for love, comfort, and morale-building, but those in cancer treatment should not clean the litter box or be responsible for picking up after Fido's walk. Also be aware that germs travel on your pets, so they may need to pay frequent visits to the groomer.
- **Avoid mosquito bites.** During mosquito season, stay indoors when they're most active, which is usually around dusk. If you notice mosquitoes outside otherwise, make sure you use some form of repellant. "I lost a good friend—a cancer patient—to the West Nile Virus, after he had essentially won the battle against his cancer," notes Aldrich.

All of this cleaning and disinfecting is usually part of the job description of the cancer caregiver, who doesn't have a lot of time in which to do it. "There were many times that I was thankful to be living in a motor home," says Aldrich. "When the cat got sick, I only had to disinfect the motor home from the front to the back. Imagine if that had been our house! Sometimes there just aren't enough hours in the day to do all of the cleaning that needs to be done. You may have to ask for help. Either hire someone you trust to come in and help with the cleaning, or ask family members and friends to pitch in and clean the sink.

"Take the proper precautions to avoid germs outside the home and to rid your home of them, then focus on fighting the cancer," concludes Aldrich. "Helping your loved one fight cancer is where most of your energy and effort should be directed, and by becoming germ savvy, you're helping the patient survive his or her battle with cancer."

The author has a plea for all readers *without* cancer: “Please, if you’re sick, stay home if you can. In this age of high technology, try to work from home through conference calls and computers. Think of it this way—the person standing next to you may be fighting for life. And for your own health and the safety of others, wait to take on the world until after you have taken care of yourself.”

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About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* for most of her life. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. However, her real motivation for writing this book was two years of crisis in the cancer school of hard knocks. She feels it is her destiny to relay this story to readers in a way that will help them in their own cancer journeys.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal* and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called “Grief.”*

For more information, visit www.thecancerlifeline.com.

About the Book:

The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, $19.95) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.