

# Don't bug me: Steering clear of infections

By Linda Kobert



Many myositis patients, especially those with poly- and/or dermatomyositis, are treated with immunosuppression therapy (IMT) to control inflammation, ease pain, and in-

crease muscle strength. Suppressing the immune system with drugs such as prednisone, methotrexate, azathioprine, or cyclosporine, however, can leave you vulnerable to a variety of infections.

Infection is a serious side effect of IMT. A research study that assessed the disease process in dermatomyositis patients, authored in part by TMA Medical Advisory Board member Mazen M. Dimachkie, MD, noted that 5% of the patients whose profiles were reviewed for the study died from infections.

Early detection of an infection is important, according to TMA Board member and infection control specialist Dr. Marvin Lauwasser. Doctors monitor patients closely for this complication through blood tests and other means. But patients can also play a role by reporting signs of infection immediately. This includes symptoms of sore throat, cough, difficulty breathing, fever, chills, painful or difficult urination, diarrhea, nausea and/or vomiting, dizziness or malaise, and unusual skin rashes.

Infections are usually preventable. Doctors often try to prevent bacterial, viral, fungal, and parasitic infections by, for example, giving the patient a flu shot or pneumonia vaccine. And they always treat signs of infection aggressively in patients taking IMT.

---

---

But individuals—even those who aren't on IMT—can also take steps to prevent the complications of infections such as colds, flu, wound infections, pneumonia, gastroenteritis, and other infectious diseases. Here is a rundown of prevention strategies:

- ✚ **Wash your hands.** Nothing prevents the spread of infection better than vigorous, frequent hand washing.
  - ✚ **Pay attention to skin wounds.** Wash the wound immediately with soap and water and apply a bandage with antibiotic ointment. See your doctor if the area develops redness, swelling, foul-smelling discharge, or doesn't show signs of healing.
  - ✚ **Avoid contact with others who are sick.** This may include avoiding crowds and close public spaces. It also includes using safe sex practices.
  - ✚ **Avoid tick and mosquito bites, which may transmit infections such as Lyme disease and West Nile virus.** Use insect repellent and cover your skin when out of doors during the summer, especially in the evening.
  - ✚ **Avoid foods that may carry bacteria, including raw eggs, unpasteurized milk, and insufficiently cooked or raw meat.** And always wash raw vegetables before eating them.
  - ✚ **Be aware of unsafe drinking water, especially if you travel outside the US.** Drink only bottled water while away, use it for rinsing your toothbrush, and don't eat or drink anything that has not been cooked or peeled.
  - ✚ **Discuss travel-related infections with a specialist** if you plan a trip to developing countries where certain infectious diseases, such as yellow fever and malaria, are prevalent.
- 
-