

Patient Care Services
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Hypercalcemia Patient Education

Calcium is found in your blood and bones and is necessary for nerve and muscle function. A normal calcium level in your blood is 8.0 to 10.0 mg/dl. Hypercalcemia is an excess of calcium in your blood and can be a life threatening problem. In cancer patients, it can be caused by an imbalance in the hormones that regulate calcium levels, kidneys not functioning well, or by cancer that has moved to the bone.

Cancer patients are at risk for hypercalcemia. Certain types of cancers are at higher risk for developing high calcium levels:

Lung Cancer: Non-small lung cancers and advanced stage cancer.

Breast Cancer: That has spread to the bone.

Head/Neck Cancer: Squamous cell highest risk in this cancer type.

Multiple Myeloma: With bone lesions and/or loss of kidney function.

Symptoms of hypercalcemia may be similar to symptoms of cancer or cancer treatments, which can make diagnosis difficult. Your symptoms will depend on your body's response to a high calcium level. The most common symptoms include:

- **urinating a lot**
- **muscle weakness**
- **nausea and/or vomiting**
- **confusion or difficulty thinking**
- **fatigue**
- **constipation**
- **drinking a lot**
- **loss of appetite**

If left untreated, high calcium levels can interfere with your nervous system, heart, stomach, kidneys, and bone. Hypercalcemia can lead to heart attack and even a coma. In order to tell if you have a high calcium level, the doctor will need to measure the calcium levels in your blood.

Treatment

Treatment of your cancer is important in controlling hypercalcemia. Hypercalcemia that is associated with cancer can be treated by restoring the body's fluid levels to allow for the calcium to be removed through your

kidneys. Medications to prevent bone loss are also used. These treatments are ordered by your doctor. You may also be asked to:

- Drink 2 to 3 quarts of fluids every day.
- Report nausea and vomiting not controlled by medication.
- Stay active; this will promote bowel function and keep calcium in your bones.
- If you have hypercalcemia it is **not** necessary to avoid calcium foods in your diet (milk, cheese, yogurt, ice cream, etc).
- It is important to remember that despite successful treatment, hypercalcemia can come back.

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