

Managing **LOW BLOOD CELL COUNTS**

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

You or your loved one has been diagnosed with a type of blood cancer. One side effect may be lower blood cell counts. What does it mean and how will it affect you?

This fact sheet will help you:

Learn about
low blood
cell counts

Understand the four
conditions with
a low blood cell count

Find out
about
treatment



What is a low blood cell count?


Blood cancer and treatments such as chemotherapy can lower your blood cell count. Low blood cell counts can lead to serious complications during cancer treatment. Your doctor will order blood tests to monitor your blood cell count during and after treatment. Often, blood cell counts return to normal after treatment.

There are three kinds of blood cells:

- Red blood cells carry oxygen.
- White blood cells help your body fight infection.
- Platelets help your blood to clot (stop bleeding).

There are four conditions that involve a low blood cell count. They are:

- Anemia: low red blood cell count
 - Neutropenia: low white blood cell count
 - Thrombocytopenia: low platelet count
 - Pancytopenia: low blood count of all three types of blood cells
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Contact your healthcare team right away if you have any symptoms of anemia, excessive bleeding, or infection.

Anemia: low red blood cell count

You develop anemia when the number of red blood cells is below normal. It often develops gradually, so you may have no symptoms at first. As your red blood cell levels get lower, you may experience:

- Extreme fatigue or weakness
- Shortness of breath, especially with physical activity
- Pale skin, gums, or nails
- Light-headedness or dizziness
- Rapid heartbeat
- Feeling cold

Neutropenia: low white blood cell count

You develop neutropenia when the number of neutrophils, a type of white blood cell, is below normal. White blood cells help your body fight infection. People with a low neutrophil count are more likely to develop infections.

Infections

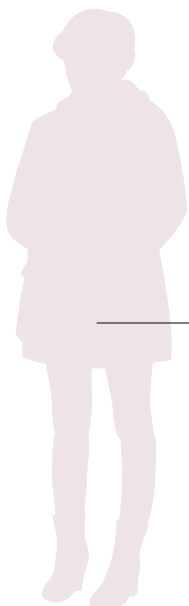
Report any signs of infection to your doctor right away.

Signs of infection

- A temperature of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher
- Chills or sweating
- Diarrhea
- A burning feeling when you urinate
- New or worsening cough or sore throat
- Odd vaginal discharge or itching
- Redness, swelling, heat, or tenderness around an injury, sore, pimple, intravenous (IV) site, or vascular access device
- Pain in your abdomen
- Bleeding gums or white patches in your mouth

Reduce your risk of infection

- Wash your hands regularly or use hand sanitizer.
- Avoid large crowds and stay away from anyone with a fever, flu, or other infection.
- Practice good hygiene and personal care.
- Wear gloves when cleaning or gardening.
- Avoid activities that put you at risk for cuts, burns, or other injuries.
- Clean cuts and scrapes right away.
- Properly care for and clean your catheter or port (if you have one).
- Keep raw and cooked foods separate.
- Make sure your meats are well cooked.
- Wash your hands well before and after handling food.
- Talk to your doctor about vaccinations that you and your caregiver should get.





Thrombocytopenia: low platelet count

Thrombocytopenia can develop when your number of platelets is below normal. Platelets help your blood to clot (stop bleeding). You may experience:

- Excessive bleeding from cuts or from your mouth, gums, or nose
- Tiny bleeding points in the skin (petechiae), especially on your lower legs and ankles
- Dark bruises from minor bumps
- Reddish or pinkish urine
- Black or bloody bowel movements
- Changes in vision, headaches, dizziness, or weakness

Excessive bleeding

To decrease your risk of bleeding:

- Avoid medications that can increase your risk, such as:
 - Aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil), and naproxen (Aleve) - unless your doctor tells you to use them.Ask your doctor for a list of medications and other products you should avoid taking.
- Do not drink alcohol without checking with your doctor first.
- Brush your teeth gently with an extra-soft toothbrush and follow dental advice for caring for your teeth and gums.
- Blow gently into a soft tissue to clean your nose.
- Be careful using sharp or hot objects to avoid cuts, nicks, and burns. Use an electric shaver instead of a razor.
- Use unscented lotion and lip balm to prevent dry skin and chapped lips.
- Avoid contact sports and other activities that might result in injury.

Pancytopenia: low blood count of all three types of blood cells

You develop pancytopenia when blood counts are below normal for all three types of blood cells: red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

Treatment for low blood cell counts

Severe low blood cell counts can lead to serious complications that may delay your next round of cancer therapy. If you have low blood cell counts, your treatment will depend on which counts are low and what is causing them to be low.

Common treatments include:

Blood transfusions

- You receive blood cells donated by a healthy donor.
- Your doctor may recommend a blood transfusion to improve blood counts, manage symptoms, and avoid treatment delays if your red blood cell counts or platelet counts are low.
- Blood transfusions can help replace red blood cells, platelets, and other blood components.
- Blood transfusions are not often used to treat low white blood cell counts.

Growth factor medications

- Help improve red blood cell or white blood cell counts
- Are given by injection or intravenously (by IV) to stimulate the bone marrow to produce more blood cells
- Can cause serious side effects in some people: talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of this therapy

Stopping or delaying treatment

- If your blood cell counts are severely low, you may need to stop your cancer treatment or delay it until your blood cell counts go up.



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