

Low Red Blood Cells/Anemia

Effects of Cancer Treatment: Low Red Blood Cells/Anemia

What are red blood cells?

Your blood is made up of fluid and many solid particles or cells. One type of cell is your red blood cell (RBC). Your red blood cells contain hemoglobin, which carries oxygen from your lungs to your tissues and cells. Your body needs oxygen to survive and give you energy. Anemia is when you don't have enough red blood cells. If you have this problem, you are anemic. When you do not have enough red blood cells, you have less hemoglobin to carry oxygen throughout your body. This means that the tissues in your body do not get enough oxygen to do their work. A normal hemoglobin (Hgb) count is between 120 and 160. A low hemoglobin can make you feel tired or weak, and you may look pale.

What causes anemia?

Your anemia could be caused by your cancer or your cancer treatment. When you are having cancer treatment, your bone marrow might not be making enough red blood cells. This makes you more likely to become anemic.

How do I know I have anemia?

At first, you may not notice the signs of anemia. If it gets worse, you may feel tired and look pale. If you have anemia, you might:

- Feel very tired (fatigue)
- Feel weak
- Feel confused or have trouble concentrating
- Feel short of breath, especially when you are more active than usual
- Have chest pains or headache
- Feel dizzy or faint
- Have trouble sleeping

What are your questions? Please ask.

We are here to help you.

If you have a severe case of anemia, your heart may beat very fast or it may have an irregular beat. This happens because your heart has to work harder to try to provide enough oxygen to all your cells and tissues. A blood test, to measure your hemoglobin, is the only way to know for sure if you have anemia. It will tell your doctor if you are anemic. Not everyone will feel the signs of anemia, even if they have the same hemoglobin level.

How will my doctor treat anemia?

Sometimes, your doctor will treat anemia with a blood transfusion. You might need to take a medicine to help your body make more red blood cells.

You and your doctor will discuss which treatment is best for you.

How can I cope with anemia?

- Ask your doctor or nurse about your red blood cell count and your hemoglobin level. If your hemoglobin is low, ask about treatment for anemia.
- Eat a healthy diet made up of many small meals.
- Try to eat foods that have iron in them, to help you make red blood cells. Some foods with iron are eggs, red meat, liver and spinach.
- Try to eat, even when you are tired. Eating small amounts of food more often may give you extra energy.
- Get lots of rest. Sleep more at nights and take naps during the day.
- Do not try to do too much each day. Do the most important things, and leave the other things for tomorrow. Ask family and friends to help you with things like shopping, housework, or cooking.
- If you feel dizzy, lie flat for a few minutes. Then slowly change your position from lying down to sitting up.
- Ask your doctor, nurse, or dietitian about taking vitamins, minerals and supplements.

Questions to ask your health care team

- Will my cancer or my cancer treatment lower my red blood cells or hemoglobin?
- How often should I have my hemoglobin checked?
- Why do I have so little energy?
- Is it my cancer or the cancer treatment that is making me so tired?
- What is my hemoglobin level? What does that mean?
- How can I keep track of my hemoglobin?
- How can I cope with anemia? Can medical treatment help?
- Can you give me a list of foods that are high in iron?

Looking for more information on this topic?

You can contact the Canadian Cancer Society at www.cancer.ca or call the Cancer Information Service of the Cancer Society at 1-888-939-3333. You can also contact your local public library for books, videos, magazine articles and online health information.

For a list of public libraries in Nova Scotia go to <http://publiclibraries.ns.ca>.

For more information visit the Nova Scotia Cancer Care Program website <http://www.nscancercare.ca>.

Patient and family feedback is very important to us.

We would like to invite you to send any comments or suggestions on how to improve this booklet to education.cancercare@nshealth.ca or feel free to call us at 1-866-599-2267.

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This pamphlet is for educational purposes only.

It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider.

If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.