

Low Platelets/Thrombocytopenia

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What are platelets?

Your blood is made up of many solid particles or cells and fluid. One type of cell is your platelets. Platelets (PLT) help the blood to clot or stop bleeding. If you do not have enough platelets in your blood, you may bruise and bleed more easily. This is called thrombocytopenia (throm·bo·cy·to·pe·nia). A normal platelet count is 150,000 -350,000 (commonly written as 150-350).

What causes low platelets?

Platelets, like other blood cells are made in your bone marrow and released into the blood stream. Systemic therapy (like chemotherapy etc.) and certain types of cancer may get in the way of the bone marrow making enough platelets. There are other non-cancer causes for low platelets but they will not be discussed here. Chemotherapy may lower your counts temporarily. Usually, 10-14 days after chemotherapy your blood counts will be at their lowest. Usually, over the next two weeks your counts will return to normal. Your blood counts will be checked before each course of chemotherapy. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist can tell you how much of a problem low platelets are with your type of cancer and chemotherapy.

What are the signs and symptoms of low platelets?

Your platelet count can drop quite a bit before you see any signs of bruising or bleeding. You may bruise more easily, or it may take longer for a cut to stop bleeding. Here are some signs to watch for:

- Easy bruising
- Small pinpoint red spots on the skin (called petechiae – pa-teak'-e-eye)
- Blood in your urine
- Gums bleed easily
- Nose bleeds

What are your questions? Please ask.

We are here to help you.

- Vomit (throw up) that looks like coffee-grounds
- Blood in your bowel movement or a bowel movement that is black or tar-like
- Bleeding from cuts, scratches, or needle pricks that will not stop

How can I prevent injury or bleeding problems?

A blow to the head may cause bleeding inside your head which can be life threatening. This most often occurs from a fall. Here are some tips to try and prevent a fall:

- Be careful getting up from lying or sitting. Make sure you are steady on your feet before walking. If you feel dizzy, lie or sit back down and try again slowly.
- Make sure the area is free of clutter and has good lighting.
- Make sure mats and rugs are secured to the floor to prevent tripping.
- Wear non-skid shoes or slippers with good support. Avoid wearing clothing that may cause you to trip and fall such as robes or pants that are too long.
- Use a walker or cane if you are unsteady when walking.
- Avoid ice when walking in the winter.
- If you are having problems walking talk to your nurse or doctor.

Some other ways to decrease your risk of bleeding problems:

- Avoid sports that may cause bruising, cuts or a blow to the head.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Protect yourself from getting cut, burned, bumped, or scraped.
- Use a soft toothbrush and brush gently, rinse with cold water if bleeding occurs.
- Stop flossing if gums bleed.
- Talk with your doctor or nurse or dentist before having any dental work.
- Use an electric razor.
- Do not let anyone give you a needle unless your cancer doctor has said it is OK.
- Avoid nose bleeds by wiping your nose. If blowing it is needed, do so gently. Keep both nostrils open when blowing. Closing off one nostril increases pressure and may cause bleeding.
- Do not use suppositories, enemas or rectal thermometers.

- Talk to your nurse or dietitian about keeping your bowel movements soft and avoid straining.
- Some drugs that you buy over the counter such as ASA (Aspirin®) or ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®) can affect how platelets work. Check with your doctor before taking any medication.
- Moisturize your lips and skin to prevent drying and cracking.
- If your house is dry, try hanging your wet wash around the house to dry, this will put some moisture in the air.
- Drink 6-8 glasses of fluid each day unless told otherwise.
- Use water based lubricant during sexual intercourse.
- Do not have anal intercourse.
- Women should not use tampons or douche.

What do I do if I have a nosebleed?

If you do have a nose bleed, sit up straight, squeeze your nose below the bridge of the nose. Apply ice above the bridge of your nose. Do not remove for 10 minutes.

What do I do if I cut myself?

If you cut yourself or if bleeding occurs, apply pressure over the area using a clean cloth for at least 5 minutes. Time yourself and do not peek.

When do I call the doctor or nurse?

Most bleeding events are minor and you do not need to see a health professional. Bruising is common and unsightly but rarely is a serious problem. Bleeding from cuts often takes longer to stop but only requires attention from a doctor or nurse if it has not stopped after pressure for 10 minutes or if stitches are needed. Go to your local emergency department if you bleed from anywhere for more than 10 minutes. Internal bleeding, blood in the urine or in a bowel movement is more serious and you should contact your nurse or doctor or go to your local emergency department.

If you have fallen or hit your head, go to your local emergency department immediately and tell them you have low platelets.

Feel free to call your nurse or doctor with any questions or concerns.

Questions to ask your healthcare team

- What is my platelet count?
- Will my cancer or my cancer treatment lower my platelet count?
- How often should I have my platelet count checked?

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 www.nscancercare.ca.

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