

# What to Do for Low Blood Counts

Some cancers and cancer treatments can cause one or more types of blood cell levels to go down. Low white blood cells, red blood cells, and platelets can cause problems, such as infections, fatigue, or bleeding. But there are things you can do to protect yourself if you have low blood counts.



## Low white blood cells (neutropenia)

**Neutropenia** is a condition where there are low numbers of white blood cells (neutrophils) in the immune system. Neutrophils help protect us against germs and from getting sick. When we get sick or injured, they help the body fight the infection or damage.

A low white blood cell count is a side effect of some cancer treatments, especially chemo. If you don't have enough white blood cells, there are things you can do to protect yourself.

- Wash your hands often. If you don't have clean running water, use hand sanitizer or hand wipes.
- Avoid large crowds of people and people who are sick. Wear a mask if you go out.
- Don't share toothbrushes, forks, spoons, cups, or straws.
- Don't eat raw or unpasteurized foods, such as milk, cheese, yogurt, and fruit and vegetable juices.
- Ask your cancer care team which vaccines you should get and when.

Depending on how low your white blood cells are, your cancer care team might suggest medicines to prevent infection or to help your body make new white blood cells.

### When to get help if you have low white blood cells:

- Temperature over 100.4 F
- Chills or sweating
- New or worse confusion
- Chest pain

- Trouble breathing, even at rest
- Not able to get out of bed for more than 24 hours



## Low red blood cells (anemia)

**Anemia** is a condition where there are low numbers of red blood cells. Red blood cells have a protein called hemoglobin, which carries oxygen throughout your body. Low levels of red blood cells can make you tired, short of breath, pale, or even dizzy.

A low red blood cell count is another side effect of some cancer treatments, especially chemo. Some types of cancer can also cause anemia. If you have a low number of red blood cells, there are things you can do to manage it and protect yourself.

- Balance activity and rest. Don't overdo it.
- Eat foods high in protein and iron, such as fish, meat, eggs, fortified cereals, dried fruits, nuts, beans, tofu, and dark, leafy vegetables.

Depending on your symptoms and the cause of your low red blood cells, your cancer care team might suggest a blood transfusion or other medicine.

### When to get help if you have low red blood cells:

- New or worse confusion
- Dark brown or bright red vomit
- Bright red, dark red, or black stool
- Bleeding that won't stop
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded, or falling down
- Chest pain
- Trouble breathing, even at rest
- Not able to get out of bed for more than 24 hours



## Low platelets (thrombocytopenia)

**Thrombocytopenia** is a condition where there are low numbers of platelets in your blood. A platelet is a type of blood cell that helps your blood clot and stop bleeding when you're injured. When your platelets are low, you might bruise or bleed easily. You might also have pain in your joints or muscles, or see blood in your spit, vomit, pee, or stool.

Low platelets can be a side effect of some cancers, chemo, radiation, certain health problems, or medicines. If you have a low number of platelets, there are things you can do to protect yourself from severe bleeding.

- Avoid doing things that might cause injuries or falls.
- Use an electric razor (not a blade) to shave.
- Use a soft toothbrush. Ask your cancer care team if it's OK to floss.
- Ask about a stool softener to help prevent constipation.
- Don't put anything in your rectum, like suppositories, enemas, or thermometers.
- Avoid medicines that thin the blood unless your cancer care team says you need to take them. This includes prescription blood thinners, as well as aspirin and NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) such as ibuprofen and naproxen.

- If you are bleeding, sit down and put pressure on the area for several minutes.
- If you fall and hit your head while your platelets are very low, get medical help to make sure there isn't bleeding in your brain.

Depending on how low your platelets are and if you're having bleeding problems, your cancer care team might suggest a platelet or blood transfusion.

### When to get help if you have low platelets:

- New or worse confusion
- Dark brown or bright red vomit
- Red or black stool
- Bleeding that won't stop
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded, or falling down
- Not able to get out of bed for more than 24 hours



### Talk to Your Cancer Care Team.

Not all cancer or cancer treatments cause low blood counts. Some might only cause one type of blood count to be low. Others might cause more than one type of blood count to be low.

### Ask your cancer care team:

- What lab test results to watch and where to find them
- When to expect blood counts to be low and for how long
- What a normal or abnormal result means for you

For cancer information and answers, visit the American Cancer Society website at [cancer.org](https://cancer.org) or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

