

Low Platelets/Thrombocytopenia

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.

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. Some chemotherapy and certain types of cancer interfere with the bone marrow and not enough platelets are made. 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 2 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 takes longer for a cut to stop bleeding.

- Easy bruising
- Small pinpoint red spots (called petechiae - pa -teak'- e- eye)
- Blood in your urine
- Gums bleed easily
- Nose bleeds
- 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 internal bleeding 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 you have adequate lighting and the area is free of clutter.
- Make sure throw rugs are secured to the floor to prevent tripping.
- Wear non-skid shoes or slippers with good support. Avoid long robes or long pants when walking.
- Use walking aids if needed such as a walker or cane.
- 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 contact sports.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Protect yourself from getting cut, burned, bumped, or scraped.
- Use a soft toothbrush and brush gently, if bleeding occurs rinse with cold water.
- Stop flossing if gums bleed.
- Talk with your doctor or nurse 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 blowing your nose, just wipe it. If blowing it is absolutely 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.
- Keep your bowel movements soft and avoid straining.
- Some medicines 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 a 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 seek medical attention. Bruising is common and unsightly but rarely is a serious problem. Bleeding from cuts often takes longer to stop but only requires medical attention 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 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?