

What is cancer-related low platelet count or thrombocytopenia?

Thrombocytopenia is a condition caused by a low number of platelets in the blood. Cancer and/or cancer treatments can lower the number of platelets. Platelets are also called thrombocytes. They are made in the bone marrow and help the blood to clot. People with a low number of platelets may bleed or bruise easily, even after a minor injury. A low platelet count increases the risk of bleeding, especially from the mouth, nose and gastrointestinal tract.

Symptoms:

Symptoms of thrombocytopenia usually aren't seen until the number of platelets is very low. Symptoms of low platelet count may begin soon after chemotherapy starts but they are usually at their worst 10-14 days after you first receive chemotherapy.

Common symptoms include:

- Bruising easily
- Tiny red spots under the skin
- Unusual bleeding from the gums or nose
- Blood in the urine
- Blood in the stool
- A lot or long-lasting bleeding from a small cut

Go directly to the Emergency Room if you have put firm pressure on a nose bleed or cut and bleeding does not stop after 10 minutes.

What can I do to help my low platelet count?

1. Make small changes to your diet

Making small changes to what you eat and drink can help lessen the chance of bleeding and bruising.

Try these diet tips if your platelet count is low:

- Avoid foods that are sharp, crunchy, spicy or acidic
- Eat a soft diet, such as soup, mashed potatoes, custards, Jell-O or pudding
- Do not drink alcohol
- Drink plenty of fluids and eat enough fibre to avoid constipation

*Talk to your oncologist if you are taking aspirin.

2. Prevent bleeding and bruising

You can try the following to help prevent bleeding or bruising if your platelet counts are low.

Use good mouth care:

- Rinse and brush your teeth after you eat
- Brush your teeth gently with an extra-soft toothbrush, cotton swabs or gauze
- Soften your toothbrush with hot water before each use

Protect your body:

- Limit activities or contact sports that might result in an injury or bruising
- Bend your knees and squat instead of bending over. This keeps the head above the level of the heart and avoids extra pressure on the blood vessels in the head and neck
- Use an electric razor instead of a disposable razor
- Wear protective gloves when working in the garden or near plants that have thorns
- Use pads instead of tampons during menstruation

3. Manage your bleeding

Contact your healthcare team at 905-682-6451 or go to the Emergency Room if any of the following bleeding problems get worse or cannot be controlled after 10 minutes.

Nosebleeds:

- If you get a nosebleed, sit up with your head titled forward
- Press a cold cloth on both sides of your nose continuously for 10 minutes
- You can also apply a cold cloth to the back of your neck

Bleeding of the gums or in the mouth:

- If you can easily reach the bleeding area, apply gentle pressure until it stops
- If you can't apply pressure to the area, hold ice water in your mouth or suck on a popsicle or ice cube until the bleeding stops

Bleeding from a cut:

- Hold a clean dry cloth against the cut for at least 10 minutes
- If possible, lift the injured body part above the level of the heart
- Do not apply a tourniquet to control bleeding because this can cause permanent tissue damage

Bleeding under the skin that is spreading or swelling:

- Hold a soft cloth or an ice pack on the area with gentle but firm pressure for 10 minutes

4. Medical help may be needed

If the platelet count is very low and you are bleeding or have a lot of bruising, you may need a platelet transfusion. Transfused platelets only last about 3 days so some people may need more than one transfusion.