

What to Do for Low Red Blood Cell Counts

Anemia is when you don't have enough red blood cells in your body. These cells carry oxygen throughout your body. If you have low levels of red blood cells, you may feel very tired and have trouble doing your usual activities.



What causes anemia?

Many things can cause low red blood cell counts. These include:

- Cancers that affect the bone marrow, such as leukemia and lymphoma
- Blood loss from injury or other problems
- Cancer treatment, such as radiation therapy or chemotherapy
- Disorders that affect the bone marrow
- Bleeding tumors
- Nutrition problems, such as low levels of iron, vitamin B12, or folate
- Medicines, such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), aspirin, steroids, and antibiotics



What are signs and symptoms of anemia?

Some common signs and symptoms of low red blood cell counts are:

- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Fast heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling lightheaded, especially when standing
- Pale skin and gums



How is anemia treated?

Treatment for low red blood cell counts depends on the cause. The most common treatments are:

- A red blood cell transfusion
- Iron supplement therapy
- Medicines that help the body make more red blood cells
- Vitamin B12 or folic acid supplements

If chemotherapy or other treatment is causing anemia, your cancer care team may lower the dose. Or they may change or stop treatment to give your body a chance to recover.



What can you do to help manage anemia?

If you don't have enough red blood cells, there are things you can do to help manage the condition.

- Balance activity and rest. Don't overdo it.
- Drink plenty of water unless your cancer care team tells you to limit your fluids.
- Eat foods high in protein and iron, such as:
 - Red meat, fatty fish, chicken, and turkey
 - Dark, leafy greens like spinach and kale
 - Beans, lentils, and tofu
 - Dried fruits, such as raisins and peaches
 - Fortified cereals and enriched pasta or rice



When to talk with your cancer care team

Talk with your cancer care team if you:

- Have dark brown or bright red vomit
- Have red or black stools
- Are dizzy, lightheaded, or have fallen
- Have a fast heartbeat
- Can't get out of bed for more than 24 hours



When to call 911 or go to the ER

Call 911 or go to the ER if you have:

- Bleeding that won't stop
- New or worse confusion
- Shortness of breath even when resting
- Chest pain or irregular heartbeat



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/anemia or call us at **1-800-227-2345**.
We're here when you need us.