

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk with your doctor or nurse.

Anemia During Cancer Treatment

What is anemia?

Anemia (ah-NEE-mee-ah) is another word for a decrease in red blood cells (RBCs). Red blood cells carry oxygen (O₂) from the lungs to every part of the body. When there are too few RBCs, your muscles and organs cannot work properly. Anemia is a common side effect of cancer treatment.

Why does cancer treatment cause anemia?

Chemotherapy works by destroying cancer cells. It may also damage healthy cells, RBCs and the bone marrow, which makes red blood cells.

Other side effects can also affect your body's ability to make red blood cells, such as decreased appetite, nausea, and vomiting.

Most of the time, anemia goes away once cancer treatment is stopped.

What effect can anemia have on me?

Besides feeling weak and tired, you may have:

- Rapid or irregular heartbeat.
- Shortness of breath.
- Headaches or dizziness.
- Difficulty sleeping or staying warm.
- Difficulty concentrating.

How will I know I have anemia due to my treatments?

Your doctor or nurse will test your blood often during treatment to check for anemia. If your RBCs are low, your doctor may suggest different treatment options.

What can I do if I have anemia?

Be sure to have all lab tests done as ordered by your doctor. If your blood count goes too low, your doctor may order a blood transfusion.

Also, you should:

- Get plenty of rest. Take naps during the day if you can.
- Limit your daily activities. Do what is most important to you.
- Do light exercises. Take short walks whenever you can.
- Eat a well-balanced diet that contains all the nutrients your body needs.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- When sitting or lying down, get up slowly to prevent dizziness.

Call you doctor right away if you have:

- Chest pain.
- Difficulty breathing (at rest).

If you cannot reach your doctor, go to the nearest hospital emergency room.

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. You may also visit the HLC on the 3rd floor, Galter Pavilion at 251 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363, the Northwestern Lake Forest Patient Relations manager at 847.535.8282 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

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