

Anemia is when you do not have enough red blood cells. If you have this problem, you are **anemic**.

Your red blood cells contain **hemoglobin**, which carries oxygen from your lungs to your tissues and cells. Your body needs oxygen to survive and give you energy.

When you do not have enough red blood cells, you have less hemoglobin to carry oxygen throughout your body. This means that the tissues in your body do not get enough oxygen to do their work. This can make you feel tired or weak, and you may look pale.



What causes anemia?

The cause of your anemia could be your cancer or your cancer treatment. When you are having cancer treatment, your bone marrow might not be making enough red blood cells. This makes you more likely to become anemic.

How do I know if I have anemia?

At first, you may not notice the signs of anemia. But as it gets worse, you may feel tired and look pale. If you have anemia, you might:

- feel very tired (**fatigue**)
- feel weak
- feel confused or have trouble concentrating
- feel short of breath, especially when you are more active than usual
- have chest pains
- get headaches
- feel dizzy or faint
- have trouble sleeping

If you have a severe case of anemia, your heart may beat very fast or not be regular. The reason this happens is that your heart has to pump more blood to try to provide enough oxygen to all your cells and tissues.

The only way to know for sure if you have anemia is to have a blood test. This test measures how much oxygen your red blood cells carry. It will tell your doctor if you are anemic. Not everyone will feel the signs of anemia, even if they have the same hemoglobin level.

How will my doctor treat anemia?

Sometimes, your doctor will treat anemia with a blood transfusion. Or, you might need to take a medicine to help your body make more red blood cells.

Your doctor will decide which treatment is best for you.

How can I cope with anemia?

- Ask your doctor or nurse about your red blood cell count and your hemoglobin level. If your hemoglobin is low, ask about treatment for anemia.
- Eat a balanced diet made up of many small meals.
- Try to eat foods that have iron in them, to help you make red blood cells. Some foods with iron are eggs, red meat, liver, and spinach.
- Try to eat, even when you are tired. Eating small amounts of food more often may give you extra energy.
- Get lots of rest. Sleep more at night and take naps during the day.
- Don't try to do too much each day. Do the most important things, and leave the other things for tomorrow. Ask family and friends to help you with things like shopping, housework, or cooking.
- **If you feel dizzy**, lie flat for a few minutes. Then slowly change your position from lying down to sitting up.
- Ask your doctor, nurse, or dietitian about taking vitamins, minerals, and supplements.

Questions to ask your health care team

- Why do I have so little energy?
- Is it my cancer or the cancer treatment that is making me so tired?
- What is my hemoglobin level? What does that mean?
- What is the normal hemoglobin level?
- How often do you measure my red blood cell count and hemoglobin level?
- How can I keep track of my hemoglobin?
- How can I cope with my anemia? Can medical treatment help?
- Can you give me a list of foods that are high in iron?

This fact sheet is meant to support the information that your health care team gives you. It is also meant to encourage you to ask questions to your health care team. This fact sheet does **not** replace any information that your healthcare team gives you.

Living Well With Cancer is a partnership among several people living with cancer, health care professionals, people who represent cancer and professional organizations, and Ortho Biotech. The LWWC partnership gratefully acknowledges the input of the QEII Health Sciences Centre in this fact sheet.

Living Well With Cancer Information Centre

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