

Aplastic Anemia

KEY POINTS

- Aplastic anemia is a rare disease in which the bone marrow does not make enough blood cells.
 - Treatment depends on how severe your aplastic anemia is. Treatment may include blood transfusions, bone marrow transplants, or medicines. You may need treatment in a hospital for any serious bleeding.
 - Ask your healthcare provider how to take care of yourself at home, what symptoms or problems you should watch for, and what to do if you have them.
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What is aplastic anemia?

Aplastic anemia is a rare disease in which the bone marrow does not make enough blood cells. Marrow is the soft, fatty tissue inside hard bone. Healthy bone marrow makes immature blood cells called stem cells. Stem cells normally develop into mature red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

- White blood cells help fight off infection.
- Red blood cells carry oxygen and nutrients to your body.
- Platelets help your blood clot.

In aplastic anemia, the body stops making enough of all three types of blood cells. It is a serious disease that can be life-threatening without treatment.

What is the cause?

The exact cause of aplastic anemia is not always known but may include:

- A condition that you have at birth
- Pesticides, arsenic, or other toxic chemicals
- Cancer that spreads to the bone marrow
- Infections such as Epstein-Barr, hepatitis, or HIV
- Treatments for cancer, lupus, or rheumatoid arthritis
- Rarely, pregnancy

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms depend on how low your blood counts are.

Symptoms of low white blood cells often include symptoms of an infection such as:

- Burning during urination
- Cough or shortness of breath

- Diarrhea
- Fever and chills
- Redness, swelling, or warmth at the site of an injury
- Sore throat
- Stuffy nose
- Unusual vaginal discharge or itching

Symptoms of low red blood cells may include:

- Fast heartbeat
- Feeling unusually weak and tired
- Having trouble concentrating
- Pale skin
- Shortness of breath, especially with activity
- Unexpected weight loss

Symptoms of low platelets may include:

- Easy bruising and bleeding, from minor injuries or brushing teeth
- Frequent nosebleeds
- Heavy menstrual periods
- Tiny red spots on the skin

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will examine you and ask about your symptoms and medical history. You may have tests such as:

- Blood tests to count each type of blood cell and to see if the cells look normal under a microscope
- A bone marrow biopsy, which uses a needle passed through the skin into the bone marrow to take a small sample of tissue for testing

How is it treated?

Treatment depends on how severe your aplastic anemia is. If you have a mild form, you may not need treatment. If you have a more severe form, treatment may include:

- Regular blood transfusions to give you healthy red blood cells
- Iron chelation therapy, which is medicine given to remove excess iron from the body caused by multiple blood transfusions
- Stem cell transplant, also called a bone marrow transplant, which use transplanted cells that grow into healthy blood-making cells
- Medicine to keep your immune system from mistakenly attacking your bone marrow so that your body can make enough blood cells
- Growth factor hormones to tell your bone marrow to make more blood cells

You may need treatment in a hospital. You will have follow-up visits with your provider to see how well your treatment is working.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will get your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

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