Anemia of Chronic Disease

KEY POINTS

- Anemia is a blood problem. It can be either not having enough red blood cells (RBCs), or not having enough hemoglobin. Hemoglobin is the protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen. Some chronic (long-term) diseases cause the bone marrow to make fewer red blood cells than normal.
- Treatment may include medicines, or in serious cases, you may have a blood transfusion.
- Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider. Ask your provider how to take care of yourself at home.

What is anemia of chronic disease?

Anemia is a blood problem. It can be either not having enough red blood cells (RBCs), or not having enough hemoglobin. Hemoglobin is the part protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen.

If you don't have enough red blood cells, or you have too little hemoglobin, or your hemoglobin is not working properly, you can't get enough oxygen to your cells.

Some chronic (long-term) diseases cause the bone marrow to make fewer red blood cells than normal. Examples of chronic diseases that may cause anemia are:

- Autoimmune diseases, such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, that cause your body to attack your own skin, joints, and other tissues
- Chronic kidney disease
- Chronic liver disease such as cirrhosis
- Chronic infections such as hepatitis B or C, a bone infection, or HIV/AIDS
- Cancer

What are the symptoms?

Mild anemia that has happened slowly over time usually does not cause symptoms. With more severe anemia, symptoms may include:

- Feeling unusually weak and tired
- Pale skin and gums
- Lightheadedness or fainting, especially when you stand up
- Fast heartbeat
- Shortness of breath, especially with activity
- Chest pain, especially with activity

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will examine you and ask about your symptoms and medical history. You will have blood tests to check how severe your anemia is and to check for possible causes.

Tell your healthcare provider if you have been taking iron, prenatal vitamins, or any kind of supplements before the tests.

What is the treatment?

Your healthcare provider may recommend taking iron and vitamins, such as folic acid and B12, if your blood test results show you need them. In some cases, your anemia may be cured when the chronic disease is treated.

If the anemia is severe and causes serious symptoms, treatment with blood transfusions can help. You may be given medicine to help your body make more red blood cells.

How can I help 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
- What vitamins and minerals you should be taking

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

A healthy lifestyle may also help:
- Eat a variety of healthy foods. Ask your provider about talking to a dietitian to create a meal plan to help with anemia and with your disease.
- Try to keep a healthy weight. If you are overweight, lose weight.
- Stay physically active as advised by your provider.
- Limit caffeine if you're having problems with a fast heartbeat.
- Learn to manage stress. Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax. For example, take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try yoga, meditation, or deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- If you smoke or use e-cigarettes, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.

- Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.

Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests. Contact your healthcare provider if you have new or worsening symptoms.

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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