Bleeding and bruising

Symptoms and complications Infosheet

This Infosheet explains what a low platelet count means, the symptoms, and the causes. It will also explain how a low platelet count is diagnosed, monitored, and treated. Some tips for self-management have been included.

What are platelets and what do they do?

There are three types of cells in your blood: red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. Some people may not have enough platelets in their blood. This is also called 'thrombocytopenia'.

Platelets are small cells that are important for stopping bleeding, which happens if a blood vessel is cut or damaged. When this happens, the platelets stick together, and work with blood chemicals called 'clotting factors' to form a clot. The clot is like a plug that closes up the hole in the blood vessel and stops the bleeding.

What is a low platelet count and what are its effects?

In adults, the normal number of platelets is between 150 million and 450 million per millilitre of blood. This is often written as $150x10^9$/L to $450x10^9$/L.

A person has a low platelet count if they have less than 150 million platelets per millilitre of blood.

You may not have symptoms if your levels are between 100 and 150 million. Below 100 million you may have symptoms. All symptoms involve bleeding (escape of blood from blood vessels) or bruising (small escapes of blood into the tissues under the skin).

What causes a low platelet count?

Blood cells are made in the bone marrow. In myeloma, abnormal plasma cells multiply and spread within the bone marrow. Eventually this makes less space for the normal blood cells, which stops the bone marrow from working properly. This means the bone marrow produces fewer blood cells, including platelets.

A low platelet count can also occur as a side effect of some myeloma treatments including thalidomide, bortezomib (Velcade®), lenalidomide (Revlimid®), cyclophosphamide, and melphalan.

What are the symptoms of thrombocytopenia?

A low platelet count does not always cause symptoms. Some of the more common signs or symptoms of a moderate to severe lack of platelets include:

- Unexplained bleeding in the mouth and gums
- Easy or excessive bruising
- Nosebleeds
- A pinpoint rash (petechiae) that may be red, purple, or brown
- Prolonged bleeding from cuts
- Blood in poo (stools), pee (urine), or vomit

Blood in poo (stools), pee (urine), or vomit can be a sign of unexplained or internal bleeding which can lead to a medical emergency. Get medical help straight away if this happens.

How is a low platelet count diagnosed and monitored?

A low platelet count is diagnosed through a routine blood test called a full blood count. This measures levels of platelets, and other blood cells, which are then compared against a normal range of values.

Your platelet levels will be monitored regularly through routine blood tests. Your healthcare team will check regularly for any signs of low platelet levels.

How is a low platelet count treated?

If your platelet count is low as a complication of the myeloma itself, then it should begin to improve when your myeloma is treated. As treatment brings your myeloma under control your bone marrow may start to recover. The bone marrow will often start producing normal amounts of platelets and other blood cells.

If platelet counts are low as a side effect of myeloma treatment, platelet levels will usually improve on days when you do not have treatment. If your platelet counts are very low, your healthcare team may need to reduce your dose of treatment for a while, or postpone treatment. This will be until your platelet levels begin to return to normal.

In some severe cases, or if there are signs of bleeding, a platelet transfusion may be needed.

A platelet transfusion is when you are given platelets from someone else (a donor). You receive the transfusion into the vein (intravenously) and it takes 15 to 30 minutes. Your platelet levels will increase immediately. The increase in your platelet levels may only last a few days and you might need to have another transfusion. You are usually given the transfusion as an outpatient.This means you do not have to stay in the hospital overnight.

Self-management tips

You should be aware of the signs and symptoms of a low platelet count and report them immediately to your healthcare team, even if this is not during your usual clinic times.

Some other self-management tips include:

- Avoid activities that can result in bruising or bleeding, such as contact sports, or having body piercings or tattoos
- Take care when brushing your teeth to avoid bleeding of the gums. Use a soft toothbrush and take care when flossing
- Take extra care not to cause cuts or wounds to the skin
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) including aspirin and ibuprofen are painkillers which can increase risk of,

bleeding. They have an effect on the kidneys as well so are **not recommended** for myeloma patients

- Limit your alcohol intake as this may worsen bleeding
- Some herbal remedies can affect platelets. All myeloma patients should check with their healthcare team before taking any herbal remedies, and this is also the case if you have low platelets

Supplements or herbal medicines that have not been prescribed by your haematologist may cause harm when taken alongside your prescribed treatment.

You must speak to your healthcare team before taking any kind of supplement or alternative treatment, including herbal, traditional or natural medicines and remedies, and vitamins or wellbeing supplements, to ensure it is safe to do so.

Key points

- A low platelet count means that you have fewer than normal platelets in your blood. It is also called 'thrombocytopenia'
- It can be caused by the myeloma itself or as a side effect of some treatments for myeloma
- Symptoms include bleeding in the nose or mouth and excessive bruising
- If there is blood in your poo (stools), pee (urine), or vomit, report this to your healthcare immediately
- Platelet count may improve as your myeloma is treated
- If your platelet count is severely low, your myeloma treatment may be reduced or you may need a platelet transfusion
- Self-management tips will help you to avoid bleeding and bruising

About this Infosheet

The information in this Infosheet is not meant to replace the advice of your healthcare team. They are the people to ask if you have questions about your individual situation.

For a list of references used to develop our resources, visit **myeloma.org.uk/references**

We value your feedback about our patient information. For a short online survey go to **myeloma.org.uk/pifeedback** or email comments to **patientinfo@myeloma.org.uk**

Other information available from Myeloma UK

Myeloma UK has a range of information booklets available covering all aspects of myeloma and related conditions. Download or order them from **myeloma.org.uk/publications**

To talk to one of our Myeloma Information Specialists about any aspect of myeloma, call our Myeloma Infoline on **0800 980 3332** or **1800 937 773** from Ireland.

The Infoline is open from Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm and is free to phone from anywhere in the UK and Ireland.

Information and support about myeloma is also available around the clock at **myeloma.org.uk**

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MyelomaUK

We're here for everything a diagnosis of myeloma brings

Get in touch to find out more about how we can support you

Call the Myeloma Infoline on
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