Bleeding and Bruising (Thrombocytopenia) in Cancer

Some cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and targeted therapy, can lower the number of platelets—the cells that help blood clot. When platelets are low, you may bruise or bleed easily and see tiny purple or red spots on your skin. This is called thrombocytopenia. Tell your healthcare team about these changes, and call right away for serious bleeding.

This page is for people in cancer treatment who bruise or bleed more easily, and for the people who care for them. It explains why this happens, what you can do, and when to call for help.

Why bleeding and bruising can happen

Some cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and targeted therapy, can increase your risk of bleeding and bruising. These treatments can lower the number of platelets in the blood. Platelets are the cells that help your blood clot and stop bleeding.

When your platelet count is low, you may bruise or bleed a lot or very easily. You may also have tiny purple or red spots on your skin. This condition is called thrombocytopenia.

Tell your doctor or nurse if you notice any of these changes.

Ways to manage bleeding and bruising

If you are at increased risk of bleeding and bruising, these steps may help:

- **Avoid certain medicines.** Many over-the-counter medicines contain aspirin or ibuprofen, which can increase your risk of bleeding. When in doubt, check the label. Ask your healthcare team for a list of medicines and products to avoid. You may also be advised to limit or avoid alcohol if your platelet count is low.
- **Take extra care to prevent bleeding.** Brush your teeth gently with a very soft toothbrush. Wear shoes, even inside. Be extra careful with sharp objects, and use an electric shaver rather than a razor. Use lotion and lip balm to prevent dry, chapped skin and lips. Tell your doctor or nurse if you are constipated or notice bleeding from your rectum.
- **Care for bleeding or bruising.** If you start to bleed, press down firmly on the area with a clean cloth and keep pressing until the bleeding stops. If you bruise, put ice on the area.

Ask your team ahead of time how long you should wait for bleeding to stop before you call them or go to the emergency room. Knowing your own number is easier than deciding in the moment.

When to get help

Some bleeding needs help fast. Use this list to decide who to call and how quickly.

- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** you have a bad headache, changes in how well you see, confusion, or you feel very sleepy. These can be signs of bleeding in the head. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** bleeding is heavy and will not stop with firm pressure, or you are vomiting blood. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** your stools are black and tarry, there is a lot of blood in your stool, or you feel dizzy or lightheaded while bleeding. That can mean bleeding in the gut (MedlinePlus (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003133.htm)). Do not drive yourself.
- **Call your care team right away if** you see blood in your stool (MedlinePlus (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003130.htm)).
- **Call your doctor immediately if** you have a temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher. According to CDC, a fever during chemotherapy is a medical emergency. Call right away rather than waiting for your next appointment (CDC (cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html)).
- **Call your care team right away if** bleeding does not stop after a few minutes, or you bleed from your mouth or nose.
- **Call your care team the same day if** your urine is red or pink.
- **Call your care team the same day if** you bleed from your vagina when you are not having your period.
- **Call your care team the same day if** your period is heavier or lasts longer than normal.
- **Call your care team the same day if** you notice new bruises without an injury, or tiny purple or red spots on your skin.

Sources

- National Cancer Institute — Bleeding and Bruising (Thrombocytopenia) and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/bleeding-bruising)
- National Cancer Institute — Infection and Neutropenia and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/infection)
- CDC — Fever and Cancer Treatment (cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html)

Source: National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/bleeding-bruising)

Last updated: 2026-09-29

Online: cancerexplained.org/side-effects/bleeding-and-bruising

Educational information only, not medical advice. An AI-assisted editorial system helped prepare this page. No named medical reviewer has reviewed it unless one is listed.

Free to print, copy and share unchanged. No permission needed. Please do not alter the medical content. Cite: cancerexplained.org. Educational information, not medical advice.