

Low Platelet Count: What Does It Mean?

What is a platelet?

A platelet (also called a thrombocyte) is a cell in the blood. Platelets help your blood to clot after an injury, like when you fall and scrape your knee. These clots help you stop bleeding.

What is thrombocytopenia?

Thrombocytopenia (THROM-bo-SI-toe-PEE-nee-uh) is when you don't have enough platelets for your blood to clot. This could be caused by many things, such as viruses, cancer, or some medicines. If you don't have enough platelets, it could be a sign of something serious.

How do I know if I have it?

Most people do not know they have it because they don't have symptoms. However, some people may have signs and symptoms such as:

- Frequent nosebleeds
- Bleeding gums after brushing teeth
- Long bleeding times after a minor cut or scratch
- Easy bruising

Thrombocytopenia can be diagnosed from a blood test. Your doctor will decide if you need more tests based on your test results, symptoms, age, and medical history. You may need to see a special doctor who focuses on blood disease.

How is it treated?

It is often treated by watching and waiting, or treating the main cause of the symptoms. People with more serious diseases, like cancer, may need to have chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

Could I start bleeding at any time?

No; most people do not bleed suddenly. The risk of sudden bleeding is low, and usually happens only in people with a very low platelet count.

Will I need a transfusion?

Most people will not need a blood transfusion unless they are bleeding and are very sick with a very low platelet count. Your doctor will decide if you need a transfusion.

What if I am pregnant?

Most pregnant women with thrombocytopenia have no problems. However, you should see your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms:

- Headaches
- Eye problems
- High blood pressure
- Abdominal pain
- Vaginal bleeding
- Seizures

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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