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## Signs and Symptoms of Cancer

Signs and symptoms are ways the body lets you know that you have an injury, illness, or disease.

- A **sign**, such as fever or bleeding, can be seen or measured by someone else.
- A **symptom**, such as pain or fatigue, is felt or noticed by the person who has it.

Signs and symptoms of cancer depend on where the cancer is, how big it is, and how much it affects nearby organs or tissues. If a cancer has spread (**metastasized**), signs or symptoms may appear in different parts of the body.

- [How does cancer cause signs and symptoms?](#)
- [What are some general signs and symptoms of cancer?](#)

### How does cancer cause signs and symptoms?

A cancer can grow into, or begin to push on nearby organs, blood vessels, and nerves. This pressure causes some of the signs and symptoms of cancer.

A cancer may also cause symptoms like fever, extreme tiredness (**fatigue**), or weight loss. This may be because cancer cells use up much of the body's energy supply. Or the cancer could release substances that change the way the body makes energy. Cancer can also cause the immune system to react in ways that produce these signs and symptoms.

### What are some general signs and symptoms of cancer?

Most signs and symptoms are not caused by cancer but can be caused by other things. If you have any signs and symptoms that don't go away or get worse, you should

see a doctor to find out what's causing them. If cancer is not the cause, a doctor can help figure out what the cause is and treat it, if needed.

For instance, lymph nodes are part of the body's immune system and help capture harmful substances in the body. Normal lymph nodes are tiny and can be hard to find. But when there's infection, inflammation, or cancer, the nodes can get larger. Those near the body's surface can get big enough to feel with your fingers, and some can even be seen as swelling or a lump under the skin. One reason lymph nodes may swell is if cancer gets trapped there. So, if you have unusual swelling or a lump, you should see your doctor to figure out what's going on.

Here are some of the more common signs and symptoms that may be caused by cancer. However, any of these can be caused by other problems as well.

- Fatigue or extreme tiredness that doesn't get better with rest (sometimes caused by [anemia or a low red blood cell count](#))
- Weight loss or gain of 10 pounds or more for no known reason
- Eating problems such as not feeling hungry, trouble swallowing, belly pain, or nausea and vomiting
- Swelling or lumps anywhere in the body
- Thickening or lump in the breast or other part of the body
- Pain, especially new or with no known reason, that doesn't go away or gets worse
- Skin changes such as a lump that bleeds or turns scaly, a new mole or a change in a mole, a sore that does not heal, or a yellowish color to the skin or eyes (**jaundice**)
- Cough or hoarseness that does not go away
- Unusual bleeding or bruising for no known reason
- Change in bowel habits, such as constipation or diarrhea, that doesn't go away or a change in how your stools look
- [Blood in your stool](#)
- Bladder changes such as pain when urinating, blood in the urine, or needing to urinate more or less often
- Fever or night sweats
- Headaches
- Vision or hearing problems
- Mouth changes such as sores, bleeding, pain, or numbness

The signs and symptoms listed above are the more common ones seen with cancer, but there are many others that are not listed here. If you notice any major changes in the way your body works or the way you feel – especially if it lasts for a long time or gets

worse – let a doctor know. If it has nothing to do with cancer, the doctor can find out more about what's going on and, if needed, treat it. If it is cancer, you'll give yourself the chance to have it treated early, when treatment is more successful.

Sometimes, it's possible to find cancer before you have symptoms. The American Cancer Society and other health groups recommend cancer-related check-ups and certain tests for people even though they have no symptoms. This helps find certain cancers early. You can find more information on early detection at the [American Cancer Society Guidelines for the Early Detection of Cancer](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/screening/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer.html)<sup>1</sup>.

And keep in mind, even if you have cancer-related screening tests, it's still important to see a doctor if you have any new or worsening signs or symptoms. The signs and symptoms might mean cancer or another illness that needs to be treated.

[Go](#)

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/screening/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer.html](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/screening/american-cancer-society-guidelines-for-the-early-detection-of-cancer.html)

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# Does Blood in Stool Mean Cancer?

Blood in your stool has many possible causes and most are not related to cancer. That's why it's important to know what might cause it and what to look for. Most of the time, blood in stool can be seen when you have a bowel movement (BM), but

sometimes you can't easily see it. It's also important to tell your doctor right away if you see blood in your stool, as it can be a sign of a serious condition.

- [What causes blood in stool?](#)
- [What does blood in the stool look like?](#)
- [What does blood from a cancer look like in stool?](#)
- [Should I be worried about blood in my stool?](#)
- [How much blood in stool is too much? Is blood in stool an emergency?](#)

## What causes blood in stool?

Blood in your stool comes from problems that cause bleeding in the [digestive system](#)<sup>1</sup> – or gastrointestinal system. There are several organs in your gastrointestinal (GI) system, including the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, colon, and rectum. Any of them can develop problems that might cause bleeding.

Possible causes of bleeding in the GI system include:

- Certain medicines – especially iron pills or supplements, blood thinners, including heparin, Coumadin, aspirin, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- [Constipation](#)<sup>2</sup> – difficulty having bowel movements
- Hemorrhoids – veins in the anus or rectum that can become swollen from pushing or straining to have a bowel movement
- Infection of the stomach and intestines – sometimes called gastroenteritis
- Trauma or fissures – injury or small tears in the lining of the gastrointestinal tract
- Diverticulitis – swelling or inflammation of small pouches in the colon
- Stomach or peptic ulcer – a sore on the lining of the stomach
- Inflammatory bowel disease – such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis
- Colon or rectal polyps – growths in the colon or rectum that may or may not turn into cancer
- [Colon or rectal cancer](#)<sup>3</sup> – usually called **colorectal cancer**
- [Anal cancer](#)<sup>4</sup>

## What does blood in the stool look like?

Blood in the stool can look different depending on the cause of the bleeding, how much blood there is, and where the bleeding comes from in the GI tract or system. The color of the blood can help doctors know where the bleeding is.

## Bright red blood in stool (hematochezia)

Smaller amounts of bright red blood in the stool means the bleeding is likely happening in the lower part of the GI tract. Sometimes this may only look like small amounts or streaks of bright red blood noticed on toilet paper after wiping. Some people might see small drops in or on their stool in the toilet. The most likely causes are hemorrhoids, polyps, tears or fissures, or certain inflammatory conditions. Sometimes there is rectal itching or discomfort along with bleeding.

Bright red blood in larger amounts is considered an emergency. This type of bleeding may discolor toilet water to be pink or reddish, and may stain undergarments.

## Dark red blood in stool (melena)

Darker blood means the bleeding is usually coming from higher up in the GI tract. You may hear this called “internal bleeding” or “upper GI bleed.” Stools may be described as “tarry” because they look dark red, blackish or black. Blood clots may or may not be present or noticeable. Darker blood is most likely due to medicines (iron pills and blood thinners), an esophagus or stomach ulcer, inflammatory bowel disease, polyp, or cancer.

## What does blood from a cancer look like in stool?

To the naked eye, blood in stool that’s from cancer can look like blood from other conditions or may be invisible. Simply looking at the amount and color of the blood – or stool – is not enough to know what’s causing the bleeding. The only way to determine what is causing blood in stool is to have a physical exam and possibly other tests. Besides a physical exam, common follow-up tests are:

- **Stool tests** to check the stool for blood and signs of colon cancer
- [Colonoscopy](#)<sup>5</sup>: an exam where a long tube is used to look at the inside structure of the colon and rectum for polyps, tumors or any other abnormal areas
- [Imaging tests](#)<sup>6</sup> to find abnormal areas where there might be bleeding
- **Blood tests** to check blood counts and organ function

Because blood in the stool that’s coming from cancer can be invisible, regular colorectal cancer screening is important. [Colorectal cancer screening tests](#)<sup>7</sup> look for signs of colorectal cancer, including hidden blood in the stool. Some tests, including stool-based tests, can be done in the privacy of your home. No matter the type of test, colorectal cancer screening helps to find cancers in earlier stages when treatment is more likely to

be successful.

## **Should I be worried about blood in my stool?**

There's no way to tell what's causing blood in your stool without getting checked by your doctor or other health care professional. Remember that blood in your stool is a warning from your body. It might be a mild, annoying problem that isn't serious. But it could also be something more serious that needs medical attention.

## **How much blood in stool is too much? Is blood in stool an emergency?**

Regardless of the cause, GI bleeding often starts and stops. This means you might see blood in your stool one day but not the next. Or it might happen every day but not with every stool. The important thing to remember is to talk to your doctor if you see blood in your stool.

### **Call your doctor or go to the emergency room right away if:**

- You have large amounts of blood in your stool or the toilet
- You have active bleeding or blood oozing from your rectum
- You see several blood clots in your stool or the toilet

Along with blood in your stool, you might have other symptoms at the same time. This can mean a serious condition may be causing them. For example, contact your doctor if you notice a change in how often you move your bowels or a change in the consistency of your stools. If you have pain in your abdomen (belly) or feel very tired or weak, contact your doctor.

### **Call your doctor or go to the emergency room if you have any of these symptoms along with blood in your stools:**

- Feeling lightheaded
- Having chest pain and [shortness of breath](#)<sup>8</sup>
- Having pain in your abdomen, pelvis, or rectum
- Having a [fever](#)<sup>9</sup>
- Having [nausea and vomiting](#)<sup>10</sup>
- Having throat pain or difficulty swallowing
- Being jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin)

- Having unexplained weight loss

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/anatomy-gallery/digestive-system.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/anatomy-gallery/digestive-system.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/constipation.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/stool-or-urine-changes/constipation.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-and-symptoms.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/colon-rectal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-and-symptoms.html)
4. [www.cancer.org/cancer/types/anal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-and-symptoms.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/anal-cancer/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-and-symptoms.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/endoscopy/colonoscopy.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/endoscopy/colonoscopy.html)
6. [www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/imaging-tests/imaging-radiology-tests-for-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/imaging-tests/imaging-radiology-tests-for-cancer.html)
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8. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/shortness-of-breath.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/shortness-of-breath.html)
9. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/infections/fever.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/infections/fever.html)
10. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/nausea-and-vomiting.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/nausea-and-vomiting.html)

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## Is Anemia a Sign of Cancer?

**Anemia**, or having a **low red blood cell count**, can make you feel tired, weak, or short of breath. Having certain types of anemia can sometimes be a symptom of cancer, but there are many other causes of anemia. If you are experiencing fatigue or have been told you have anemia, it's important to find out what is causing it and what you can do to help prevent and manage it.

- [What is anemia?](#)
- [How do I know if I have anemia?](#)
- [How serious is anemia?](#)
- [Is anemia a symptom of cancer?](#)
- [Other causes of anemia](#)
- [Can anemia be prevented?](#)

### What is anemia?

Anemia is a condition where you don't have enough red blood cells (RBCs) circulating in your blood. RBCs have an iron-rich protein called **hemoglobin** (Hgb), which carries oxygen throughout your body. Cells in your body need oxygen to function and survive. When you don't have enough RBCs carrying oxygen through your blood, it can make you feel tired, weak, short of breath, or cause other symptoms.

Anemia can be:

- **Acute**, coming on suddenly due to an injury, surgery, trauma, or acute illness



- **Chronic and long-lasting**; some types may never go away completely
- **Mild, moderate, or severe** depending on the RBC and hemoglobin levels

There are many different types, or categories, of anemia. They are usually named for their cause or risk factor.

## How do I know if I have anemia?

Anemia is found by doing a blood test called a [complete blood count \(CBC\)](#)<sup>1</sup> to check your RBC and hemoglobin levels.

This test might be done to check for anemia because of symptoms you are having. However, you might not feel any effects of anemia until your hemoglobin level is very low.

Common **signs and symptoms of anemia** are:

- Extreme tiredness ([fatigue](#))<sup>2</sup>
- Fast heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Swelling in the hands or feet
- Pale skin, nail beds, mouth, or gums

If anemia is found on a CBC, other tests might be needed to find out the exact cause.

## How serious is anemia?

**Anemia can range from mild to severe.** Certain health problems such as heart or lung problems can make anemia symptoms worse.

**Call 911 or go to the emergency room if you have:**

- Bleeding that won't stop
- New or worse confusion
- Shortness of breath even when resting
- Chest pain or irregular heartbeat

## Is anemia a symptom of cancer?

**Anemia can be a symptom of cancer.** Certain cancers affect the bone marrow, where blood cells are made. This can affect cause low blood counts and result in anemia.

These cancers include:

- Leukemia
- Lymphoma
- Multiple myeloma
- Myelodysplastic syndromes

Other cancers can cause anemia due to chronic inflammation, blood loss, or poor nutrient absorption.

**Anemia can also be a side effect of cancer treatment.** For example, chemotherapy and radiation therapy can damage the bone marrow and lower RBC levels, which can lead to anemia.

## Other causes of anemia

Most people with anemia do not have cancer. Anemia can be caused by many different conditions.

### Nutrition problems

Inadequate nutrition or having a condition that causes nutrients not to be absorbed properly can cause anemia. This is called having a **deficiency**.

- **Iron-deficiency anemia** is caused by not enough iron in the body, leading to low hemoglobin levels and fewer RBCs. Excess blood loss from gastrointestinal (GI) bleeding and heavy menstrual periods can also cause iron-deficiency anemia.
- **Vitamin deficiency anemia** is due to having not enough of a specific vitamin in the body. Examples include Vitamin B12 (cobalamin) or Vitamin B9 (folate) deficiency.

### Long-term health problems

Some chronic or long-term health problems can lead to anemia. Since all blood cells are

produced in the bone marrow, any condition that affects the bone marrow or how nutrients are circulated can cause anemia.

- **Aplastic anemia** is a rare but very serious types of anemia. It's caused by bone marrow failure leading to low RBCs (as well as white blood cells and platelets).
- **Other bone marrow disorders or blood disorders.**
- **Chronic organ problems** such as thyroid, kidney, or liver disease can affect how RBCs are circulated which can lead to anemia. Some autoimmune and immune disorders may have a similar effect.

### Trauma or injury

**Blood loss** from an injury, major surgery, or other trauma causes anemia. This may be mild or severe, depending on the type of injury and where it's located in the body.

### Inherited or acquired blood disorders

Certain types of anemia are caused by inherited genes (genetic change or mutation) from parents. Others may develop later.

- **Sickle cell anemia** is a genetic disorder where RBCs are stiff and sickle-shaped, or shaped like a crescent instead of being normally round. This blocks blood flow and oxygen to parts of the body.
- **Hemolytic anemia** is a condition where RBCs are destroyed by the body faster than they can be replaced. Certain types are inherited, while others develop due autoimmune disorders, infections, medications, or toxins.
- **Thalassemia** is a genetic disorder where the body makes an abnormal form of hemoglobin, leading to excessive destruction of RBCs.
- **Dyserythropoietic anemia or congenital dyserythropoietic anemia (CDA)** is rare and happens when the bone marrow is not able to produce enough RBCs.
- **Iron-refractory iron deficiency anemia (IRIDA)** is a rare form of iron deficiency anemia that doesn't respond well to iron supplements.

### Medicines and treatments

- Certain medicines taken can have anemia as a side effect. These include **aspirin**, **nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)**, **steroids**, and **antibiotics**.

- **Cancer treatments** such as surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy can cause anemia. Read more about [anemia as a side effect of cancer treatment](#)<sup>3</sup>.

## Can anemia be prevented?

There is no sure way to prevent anemia, but there are some things you can do that might help reduce your risk.

- **Eat a healthy diet and consider supplements.** Be sure you are getting enough iron, folate, vitamin B12, and other nutrients. Talk to your doctor about any supplements you might need.
- **Manage any chronic conditions.** Get routine care that's recommended for managing any chronic conditions you may have, like thyroid, kidney, liver, or autoimmune disorders.
- **Get regular checkups.** Regular physical exams and blood tests can help find signs of anemia and other problems.

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/understanding-your-lab-test-results.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/tests/understanding-your-lab-test-results.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/fatigue-weakness-sleep.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/fatigue-weakness-sleep.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/low-blood-counts/anemia.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/low-blood-counts/anemia.html)

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