

Information resources for families

Blood tests and blood counts



Why we order blood tests

Chemotherapy works by killing cells that grow quickly, such as cancer cells. However, it also kills other good cells that are growing fast, such as blood cells grown in the bone marrow. Your healthcare team will order regular blood tests to find out if they need to treat a low blood count and to know when it is safe to give the next dose of chemotherapy. You may not have to come to the hospital for every blood test. Sometimes, blood tests can be taken by nurses in your community.

Red blood cells

Red blood cells contain haemoglobin (Hb), which carries oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. Haemoglobin levels tell us how many red blood cells there are. When the haemoglobin level is low, this is called anaemia. Your child

may look pale, feel tired, dizzy or short of breath. Call the hospital if you see these signs or you are concerned. When haemoglobin is low, your child may need to come to the hospital for a blood transfusion. After a transfusion, your child will look less pale and have more energy.

White blood cells

White blood cells fight infection. The most important white cells are neutrophils. They fight bacterial infections. When the neutrophil count is low, this is called neutropaenia. Your child is at risk of getting a serious bacterial infection if their neutrophil level is low. If your child has a fever 38°C or above you must call the hospital immediately and seek medical attention.

Platelets

Platelets are needed to make clots to stop bleeding. When your child's platelet count is low this is called thrombocytopenia. Sometimes if your child's platelet count is too low, they may need a platelet transfusion. Some signs that your child has a low platelet count are increased bruising, nose bleeds, bleeding gums or tiny red spots that suddenly appear on the skin (these are tiny bruises). Call the hospital if your child has any of these symptoms or you are concerned.

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