Polycythemia Vera
(Too Many Red Blood Cells)

Polycythemia Vera is a condition in which the body makes too many red blood cells and there is no known cause. The red blood cells (*erythrocytes*) are the cells which carry the oxygen in your blood stream to the cells of your body. Because of the increased red blood cells, the blood becomes thicker and does not circulate as well. It would be similar to your car having oil which is too thick so it cannot start and circulate as well. When the blood is too thick it often causes headaches and dizziness. It may also cause blood clots. Even though the blood clots easier, these patients bleed easier. The bleeding is caused because the blood cells which help stop bleeding (*platelets*) do not function normally. It occurs in all age groups but is more common in the 50 to 70 year age range.

TREATMENT

The treatment of polycythemia vera for many years has been blood removal (*phlebotomy*) which is similar to blood removal in a blood bank, however this blood is not used for donation. Hydroxyurea is used to supplement phlebotomy. Aspirin is commonly given to thin the blood as long as the patient does not have a problem with bleeding. Other drugs are used based on the progression of the disease.

Document Released: 09/12/2002 Document Re-Released: 04/05/2010
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