Anemia and Aging

Hemoglobin is the protein in your blood that carries oxygen. If this protein becomes too low, you are anemic. Usually mild anemia (low red blood cells) may not be noticeable. However, if it becomes more severe, you may feel tired, short of breath with activity, and may experience fainting or *palpitations* (heart beats you can feel). As many as 61% of elderly people have anemia. This depends on age, sex, and overall health. The chance of becoming anemic increases after age 65 and is greater in men.

CAUSES

There are many causes of anemia. Studies have shown the 2 major causes of anemia in the elderly are:

- ***Chronic* (long standing) disease.**
  - Anemia of chronic disease: Certain chronic diseases can interfere with the production of red blood cells, resulting in chronic anemia. The kidneys produce a hormone called erythropoietin which stimulates your bone marrow to produce red blood cells. Bone marrow is the soft, spongy tissue found in bone cavities which makes and stores most of the red blood cells.
  - Iron is also needed for red blood cell production. In anemia of chronic disease a body can not use its stored iron. Erythropoietin is suppressed (held down from working) and the bone marrow does not respond normally. A shortage of iron and erythropoietin can result in a shortage of red blood cells.
- **Iron deficiency.**
  - Iron deficiency anemia can result from chronic, often undetected blood loss. Another cause is from not eating enough iron in your diet, or when your body is not absorbing enough iron. About 20% to 36% of elderly people have idiopathic anemia. This means no cause for the anemia can be found.

EFFECTS OF UNTREATED ANEMIA

Elderly people with anemia are 40% more likely to have problems that keep them from being independent. Some of these problems include:

- Poor balance.
- Falling more often.
- Heart trouble.
- Depression.
- Problems with memory and concentration.
- Not being able to walk long distances.

Anemia has been shown to shorten the life expectancy of elderly people. As early as age 65, people with kidney disease, diabetes, and/or heart failure are more likely to die if they have anemia. Anemia can also make certain medical conditions worse. Getting treatment for anemia is important. This does not guarantee you will live longer if the anemia is corrected, but it this information shows how important it is to treat your anemia.

SYMPTOMS

Most people do not realize they are anemic until a blood test is done. Symptoms and signs usually develop when anemia is moderate to severe. Symptoms can include:

- Fatigue.
- Weakness.
- Pale skin.
- Chest pain.
- Dizziness.
- Irritability.
- Trouble breathing.
- A fast heartbeat.
- Headaches.
- Numbness or coldness in your hands and feet.

One of the problems in identifying anemia in the elderly is that many of these symptoms are typically associated with getting older. It is important to see your caregiver on a regular basis in order to be tested for anemia.

TREATMENT

Your caregiver will provide the treatment that is best for you based on what is causing the anemia. Several medications are approved to help correct anemia. Close communication with your caregiver will help you to receive the best anemia treatment available.

Normal Lab Values:

Normal hemoglobin is greater than 12 g/dL for women, with a hematocrit which is greater than 37%.
Normal hemoglobin is greater than 14 g/dL for men, with a normal hematocrit which is greater than 42%.

This information is courtesy of the National Anemia Action Council. For more information see www.anemia.org.

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