Anemia & Inflammatory Bowel Disease
(Ulcerative Colitis and Crohn's Disease)

Anemia is a level of hemoglobin or hematocrit which is lower than normal. Hemoglobin is the substance in red blood cells that carries oxygen to all parts of your body. Hematocrit is a reading which is the percentage of your blood which is made up of red blood cells. Anemia can be temporary or it can be caused by long term disease or illness. People with mild anemia may not have symptoms or may have only mild symptoms. People with severe anemia can:

- Feel tired.
- Get short of breath with activity.
- Have problems with daily activities.

Studies show that at least 10% of people with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) have anemia.

CAUSES

There can be many reasons for a person with IBD to experience anemia. These include blood loss from the intestines or problems taking in and absorbing enough nutrients. These nutrients are the building blocks for all cells, including red blood cells. Another cause of anemia is the inflammation that occurs with IBD. Inflamed tissues give off small proteins that decrease the iron available for making red blood cells, interfere with the ability of the bone marrow to make red blood cells, and decrease the erythropoietin produced by your kidneys (hormone that regulates production of red blood cells). Red blood cells carry hemoglobin, and without enough red blood cells, anemia can develop.

SYMPTOM

Most people do not realize they are anemic until a blood test shows a low hemoglobin or hematocrit. Symptoms and signs usually develop when anemia is moderate to severe, and can include:

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

Studies show people who have both IBD and anemia tend to have more severe IBD than people without anemia. Anemic people also have a higher mortality (death) rate. These studies do not guarantee you will live longer if anemia is corrected, but it shows how important it is to treat your anemia.

DIAGNOSIS

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

TREATMENT

Since the inflammation associated with IBD often causes anemia, anti-inflammatory drugs used to treat your IBD may also treat your anemia. If you have low iron levels, your doctor or caregiver may prescribe iron pills or intravenous infusions (iron injected into your blood stream) of iron. In certain cases, people have benefited from a combination of iron and drugs that stimulate the production of red blood cells.

Normal Lab Values:

Normal hemoglobin is greater than 12 g/dL for women, with a normal hematocrit which is greater than 36%.
Normal hemoglobin is greater than 14 g/dL for men, with a normal hematocrit which is greater than 42%.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Hemoglobin: Substance carried by red blood cells; delivers oxygen throughout your body.
Hematocrit: Percentage of red blood cells in a blood sample.
IBD: Inflammatory Bowel Disease
Inflammation: Your body's response to injury or irritation; often associated with pain, redness, heat, and/or swelling.
Erythropoietin: Hormone that regulates red blood cell production.
Anti-inflammatory drugs: Drugs that reduce signs and symptoms of inflammation.

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

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