



## Care of the Client with Anemia

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Describe the role of red blood cells in oxygenation of body cells.
2. List causes and common symptoms of anemia.
3. Identify a common diagnostic test for anemia.
4. Discuss the needs and care of clients with anemia.

As Maria was working with Mrs. Gill, an 80-year old client, she noticed some things that concerned her. Mrs. Gill was quite pale, and became short of breath when moving to the chair. Maria shared her concerns with the nurse, who told her that Mrs. Gill's symptoms are caused by anemia, a lack of red blood cells. The nurse explained that this reduces Mrs. Gill's ability to get the oxygen she needs, affecting her breathing and energy levels. Maria and the nurse then discussed the type of care that would help Mrs. Gill.

This newsletter will present an overview of anemia, including definition, causes, symptoms, and common medical treatment. The role of the home health aide in meeting the needs of clients with anemia will also be covered.

### The Importance of Red Blood Cells

In order for the body to function normally, its body systems, organs, tissues and cells must receive oxygen on a continuous basis. This job is performed by the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, which function to provide oxygen to the blood and send it throughout the body. The red blood cells (RBCs) play a key role in this process.

RBCs are smooth, round, disk-shaped cells, produced in the bone marrow. RBCs are continually produced, live an average of 120 days, and then die. They contain hemoglobin, a protein that has the

ability to carry gas molecules, such as oxygen. When the lungs deliver oxygen to the bloodstream, it attaches to the hemoglobin in the RBCs and is carried throughout the body for use by its cells. Once the RBC gives up the oxygen to the cells, it can pick up waste gas produced by the cells, such as carbon dioxide, and carry it to the lungs, where it is eliminated from the body.

This process depends on having an adequate number of RBCs in circulation and an adequate amount of hemoglobin in each RBC. Anemia is a decrease in the number of RBCs or the amount of hemoglobin, which can seriously affect the body's function. Anemia is not a disease on its own, but is an indication of some type of disorder in the body.

### Anemia- Causes and Symptoms

Anemia can be a very mild condition, with hardly any symptoms, or it can be severe, causing serious symptoms. It may also last a short time, or may become a long-term, chronic condition. Anemia occurs in one of three ways, when:

- *a large number of RBCs are lost-* due to bleeding, such as from heavy menstrual periods or GI bleeding
- *production of RBCs is reduced-* may occur with certain cancers, liver or kidney disease, chronic illnesses, malnutrition, iron deficiency, vitamin deficiencies, certain medications, chemotherapy/radiation treatments, or lead poisoning

• *RBCs are destroyed or die off more quickly than normal*- may be due to infections, burn injuries, enlarged spleen, sickle cell anemia, spider/snake venom or blood transfusion reactions

Symptoms of anemia often come on slowly and are not always obvious to the affected persons or their doctors. These symptoms may appear to be a worsening of a chronic disease the person already has. Symptoms may include:

fatigue	shortness of breath	palpitations
weakness	difficulty concentrating	dizziness
irritability	cold hands and feet	headache
pale skin	pale mucous membranes	chest pain

### **Diagnosis and Treatment**

Anemia can be diagnosed with a standard blood test, the complete blood count (CBC). CBC results include information such as the number of RBCs and how much hemoglobin is present. Diagnosing the *cause* of the anemia, however, can be very complex and may require a number of diagnostic tests, such as liver or kidney function tests, GI tests to look for hidden bleeding, and tests to measure vitamin and iron levels. If necessary, bone marrow may also be removed for testing.

Treatment of anemia is based on its cause. For example, if the cause is a vitamin or iron deficiency, then supplementation of these nutrients may be ordered. If a drug is causing anemia, a reduction in dose or change to another drug may be necessary. If an underlying disease is the cause, treatment of the disease often improves anemia. Drugs that stimulate production of RBCs, such as Procrit or Epogen, may also be used. Blood transfusions may be required in cases of severe anemia, until other treatment can improve the condition.

### **Needs and Care of the Client with Anemia**

The client with anemia has a number of needs that must be addressed for optimum care. When working with these clients, it's important to:

***Provide good skin and oral care:*** Clients with anemia may not have good oxygenation of the tissues. This increases the risk of skin breakdown. Also, clients who are fatigued or short of breath may move around less, also increasing this risk. Inspect the skin for damage due to pressure every few hours, and assist the client to change position every 1–2 hours to prevent pressure sores. Notify the nurse promptly of any red or dark area that does not return to normal color after a change of position.

Good oral care helps to keep the tissues of the mouth healthy. Provide oral care upon waking, after meals, and at bedtime. Some clients with anemia

may have glossitis, a swollen and tender tongue. Notify the nurse if the client complains of mouth pain. Soft, cool foods, such as gelatin or ice cream, may be helpful if the client has difficulty eating.

***Manage fatigue:*** Fatigue commonly occurs in clients with anemia, since the body's cells do not receive adequate oxygen to function. To manage fatigue, space out activities to allow time for rest. Schedule more demanding activities, such as bathing or a daily walk, when the client feels best, which may be in the morning. If the client develops shortness of breath or other symptoms, stop the activity and notify the nurse. Do not resume the activity until the symptoms are gone. Let the nurse know if your client becomes fatigued when performing normal activities, since assistive devices, such as a walker, may be needed. Above all, listen to the client, and provide for rest when needed.

***Promote good nutrition:*** Since anemia may result from nutritional deficiencies, it is important to pay attention to the client's eating patterns. Be familiar with the client's dietary orders, and document the amount eaten at each meal.

***Promote safety:*** Safety is of primary importance, especially for clients who have weakness or dizziness due to anemia. Have the client change position slowly, and make sure there is no dizziness before ambulating. Ensure that there is a seat nearby when ambulating with a weak client, or bring the client's wheelchair along. Take the client to the bathroom immediately before bedtime, to decrease the chance that he or she will have to get up at night. Also, caution the client with weakness or dizziness to call for assistance before getting out of bed at night, and check on the client frequently.

***Monitor for complications or worsening condition:*** Monitor the client's vital signs as ordered. Notify the nurse if the client shows signs of worsening condition, such as shortness of breath, irregular pulse, chest pain or confusion. Let the nurse know if the client has symptoms that interfere with quality of life, such as fatigue or cold hands and feet.

***Promote comfort:*** Clients with anemia may feel cold, particularly in the hands and feet. To promote comfort, help to keep the client warm with sweaters, blankets, socks and/or warm drinks. Maintain the room at a comfortable temperature for the client. If the client complains of any discomfort, such as a headache, let the nurse know promptly, so this can be treated.

Through good care and observation, you can help the client with anemia to prevent complications and improve his or her quality of life.



## Care of the Client with Anemia

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ UNIT: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_ 1. Red blood cells (RBCs) function to:
- A. pick up oxygen from the lungs
  - B. transport oxygen to body cells
  - C. remove waste gases, such as carbon dioxide
  - D. all of the above
- \_\_\_\_ 2. Red blood cells are produced in the:
- A. pancreas
  - B. spleen
  - C. bone marrow
  - D. lungs
- \_\_\_\_ 3. Anemia is best defined as:
- A. reduced RBCs or hemoglobin
  - B. an infectious disease
  - C. inflammation that affects blood circulation
  - D. lack of oxygen molecules available in the lungs
- \_\_\_\_ 4. Anemia is likely to result when RBCs have a longer than usual life span.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_\_ 5. Which of the following is most likely to cause anemia by reducing the production of RBCs?
- A. liver or kidney disease
  - B. spider/snake venom
  - C. GI bleeding
  - D. blood transfusion reaction

- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Which of the following is NOT a common symptom of anemia?
- A. having pale skin and mucous membranes
  - B. having fatigue and weakness
  - C. feeling too warm
  - D. feeling irritable
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Clients with anemia are at increased risk for skin breakdown due to decreased oxygenation of the tissues.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Mrs. T is a client with anemia who is suffering from mouth and tongue pain. Which of the following foods would she most likely be able to eat comfortably?
- A. lettuce salad
  - B. beef broth
  - C. pudding
  - D. macaroni and cheese
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. To prevent falls in clients with anemia, care should include:
- A. having the client change positions slowly
  - B. checking for dizziness or weakness before ambulating
  - C. reminding the client to have assistance before trying to get up
  - D. all of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Mr. Rose, a client with anemia, is walking to the bathroom with the home health aide. He becomes short of breath and complains of palpitations. The home health aide should:
- A. continue walking and tell Mr. Rose that these symptoms are expected
  - B. have Mr. Rose sit down on the nearest chair until his symptoms go away
  - C. ask Mr. Rose if he thinks he can continue walking to the bathroom
  - D. go to the bedroom for Mr. Rose's wheelchair and use it to take him to the bathroom

