

# Diet tips for low blood cell counts

For patients with cancer who have low blood cell counts



## What does it mean to have low blood cell counts?

- Cancer and cancer treatments, like chemotherapy and radiation, can cause the bone marrow to make fewer blood cells than normal. This can lead to low blood cell counts.
- You may have low counts of white blood cells, red blood cells, or platelets.
- Often these counts go back to normal before your next round of treatment or after you are done treatment.

## Can my diet help raise my blood cell counts?

There are no special foods or diet changes shown to raise blood cell counts. However, your body needs nutrients to make new blood cells, like:

- Protein
- Folate
- Vitamin B12
- Iron

If you do not get enough of these nutrients, especially protein, your blood cell counts can get worse. The chart on the back of this handout lists **food sources** for each of these blood-building nutrients.

## The importance of food safety

In general, cancer and cancer treatments make it harder for your body to fight infection. This is especially true if you have low white blood cell counts.

Always follow good food safety practices to lower your risk of foodborne illness. Most importantly:

- Wash your hands well with warm, soapy water before and after you cook and eat.
- Clean countertops, cutting boards, and utensils well after each use.
- Cook meats and poultry until well done.
- Rinse fruits and vegetables well under running water.
- Put foods in the fridge within 2 hours after serving, or within 1 hour if the food has eggs, meat, fish, poultry, cream, milk, or mayonnaise.
- Freeze leftovers right away to eat later or throw them away after 3 days.
- Avoid raw or undercooked eggs, meat, poultry, fish, home-canned foods, and foods from bulk bins, salad bars, delicatessens, buffets, potlucks, and sidewalk vendors.

## Blood-building nutrients

<b>Protein</b>	<p>Try to eat a protein food at each meal and snack. Foods high in protein include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meat, poultry, fish, seafood</li><li>• Eggs and dairy products, like cheese, yogurt, milk, and skim milk powder</li><li>• Legumes, like lentils, chickpeas, split peas, kidney beans, baked beans, hummus</li><li>• Soy foods, like tofu, tempeh, and soy milk</li><li>• Nuts and seeds, like hemp hearts, almonds, and peanut butter</li></ul>
<b>Vitamin B12</b>	<p>Try to eat a few foods high in vitamin B12 each day. Foods high in vitamin B12 include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meat, poultry, fish, seafood</li><li>• Egg yolks and dairy products, like cheese, yogurt, milk, and skim milk powder</li><li>• Fortified non-dairy choices, like fortified soy milk</li><li>• Fortified nutritional yeast</li></ul>
<b>Folate</b>	<p>Try to eat a few foods high in folate each day. Foods high in folate include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Legumes, like lentils, kidney beans, chickpeas, lima beans, navy beans</li><li>• Beets, green peas, asparagus, avocado, parsnips, spinach, romaine lettuce, brussels sprouts, broccoli</li><li>• Fortified cereals and foods made from enriched or whole grain flour</li><li>• Orange juice</li></ul> <p>Note: If you have lost weight or have problems eating, some of these foods may not be the best choice. Ask your dietitian if you need a multivitamin-mineral supplement instead.</p>
<b>Iron</b>	<p>Try to eat a few foods high in iron each day. Your doctor may also recommend an iron supplement to you. Be sure to take this as prescribed. Foods high in iron include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meat, seafood, organ meats like liver or kidney</li><li>• Egg yolks</li><li>• Fortified cereals and foods made from “enriched” or whole grain flour</li><li>• Soy foods, like firm tofu, tempeh, and soy milk</li><li>• Legumes, like lentils, kidney beans, chickpeas, lima beans, navy beans</li><li>• Cooked spinach, snow peas, Swiss chard, asparagus, beets, beet greens</li><li>• Blackstrap molasses</li></ul>

If you are a patient at the Odette Cancer Centre and you would like more nutrition information, please visit the Nutrition Resource Centre, T-Wing ground floor, TG-261 (across from the café) or call 416-480-5000 ext. 3438.