

Monitoring low blood platelet count in pregnancy

Maternity Service

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Information for Patients

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Introduction

Thrombocytopenia, or a low blood platelet count, happens in around 8 to 10 in every 100 pregnancies. This condition is often found during routine blood tests in pregnancy. This leaflet explains how you will be looked after if your platelet count is low.

What are platelets?

Platelets are small cells in the blood. They help your blood to clot and stop bleeding. The normal range for platelet count is 140,000 to 400,000 per microliter (mcL) of blood (or 140 to 400 x 10⁹/L). If your platelet count is low it is called **thrombocytopenia**.

What are the symptoms?

Many pregnant people have no symptoms. We find low platelet count during routine pregnancy blood test. Some pregnant people may bleed or bruise easily. They may have small red or purple marks on the skin (purpura or petechiae). Sometimes they may have bleeding like nosebleeds.

Why does this need to be monitored?

Platelets help your blood to clot. If your platelets are low, you may have bleeding problems. These can be prevented with the right care. Often bleeding problems do not happen unless platelets fall below 30 to 50 x 10⁹/L.

It is important to check a low platelet count to reduce any risks. You will need to have regular blood tests. The midwifery team will look at the results. If needed you will be seen in the antenatal haematology clinic.

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What causes this?

Up to 1 in 10 pregnant people have low platelet counts in pregnancy because of natural changes. This is called “gestational thrombocytopenia”. It is not a concern as platelets rarely fall below $80 \times 10^9/L$. Levels often return to normal a few weeks after your baby is born.

Some pregnant people get a non-pregnancy related condition called ‘immune thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP)’. In ITP the immune system makes antibodies that attack the body’s own tissue instead of fighting infections. These antibodies may attack platelets causing low platelet count. ITP may need steroid therapy and/ or other treatment to keep platelets at a good level. Your doctor will talk to you about treatment options if you need them.

Will this effect if I can have an epidural for pain relief during labour?

Epidural is a type of pain relief. Anaesthetic is injected into the lining of the spine. This may not be possible if your platelet count is below $80 \times 10^9/L$. We will talk to you about other options for pain relief.

Can it affect my baby?

- If your platelet count is only a little low, it should not cause problems for you or your baby.
- If you have ITP, some antibodies can cross the placenta to the baby and attach to the baby’s platelets. This can make the baby’s platelet count low. This is unusual. It rarely causes any bleeding problems in the baby.
- We may need to take some steps to reduce trauma to the baby at birth, such as not having suction delivery (ventouse).
- We can take a blood sample from the umbilical cord at delivery to check the platelet count. Sometimes babies may need a platelet transfusion if their count is very low.

Contact details:

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Maternity services: **0116 258 6111**

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