

Polycythemia vera

What is polycythemia vera?

Polycythemia [pahl-ee-sy-THEE-me-a] **vera** [VARE-uh] is a condition in which your bone marrow makes too many blood cells, especially red blood cells. When you have too many red blood cells, your blood thickens. This increases your risk for several serious health problems.

With treatment, most people have very few problems. Without treatment, it can be life-threatening.

What causes polycythemia vera?

Polycythemia is caused by a change in your bone marrow where blood cells are produced. Researchers don't yet know what causes this change, but it occurs more often in men than women, and mostly in patients over 40 years old. Sometimes it runs in families.

How is it diagnosed?

It usually shows up during a blood test. If the blood test shows signs of polycythemia vera, your doctor may confirm the diagnosis with other tests, such as a bone marrow test or a genetic (DNA) test.

What are the symptoms?

Some people don't notice many symptoms, even after diagnosis. Noticeable symptoms may include:

- Trouble breathing when you lie down
- Shortness of breath
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Itchiness, especially after a bath or shower
- Red skin, especially on your face
- Numbness, tingling, burning, or weakness in your hands, feet, arms, or legs
- A feeling of fullness in your left upper abdomen

Most of these symptoms are caused by poor circulation and thickening and clotting of the blood.



What do I need to do next?

- 1 If you smoke, try to quit.
- 2 Exercise at least three times per week to improve your blood circulation.
- 3 Care for any sores on your skin, which may heal more slowly due to this condition.

How is polycythemia vera treated?

Polycythemia vera cannot be cured. The goal of treatment is to thin your blood. This will help prevent symptoms and complications.

Treatments include:

- Drawing blood (also called **phlebotomy**). Blood is removed every week or so until your blood levels become more normal.
- Medicine to reduce the number of red blood cells you produce.
- Medicine to thin the blood, such as low-dose aspirin.

If **polycythemia vera goes untreated**, it can cause your blood to thicken. This can put you at risk for:

- **Blood clots**, which make you more likely to have a stroke, a heart attack, or a blocked artery in your lungs or in a deep muscle
- **Bleeding** from the stomach or other parts of the intestinal tract
- **Joint pain** caused by inflammation (gout)
- **An enlarged spleen**, possibly requiring surgery to remove it
- Other blood or bone marrow problems. These are rare.

What can I do about it?

Polycythemia vera affects your circulation. The most important things you can do are to try to improve your circulation and protect your skin. Follow these recommendations:

- **Exercise** to improve your circulation and decrease the risk of blood clots.
- **Quit smoking.** Tobacco narrows your blood vessels and increases the risk of clotting.
- **Care for your skin.** Poor circulation can make sores heal slowly.
- **Avoid extreme temperatures.** Poor circulation can make you more sensitive to extremely hot or cold temperatures.



When should I call 911?

Call 911 right away if you experience any of the following signs of a stroke:

- Numbness or weakness of your face, arm, or leg
- Difficulty speaking
- Blurred vision or trouble seeing
- Dizziness or loss of balance
- Severe headache



When should I call my doctor?

Contact your doctor right away if any of these symptoms happen suddenly:

- Trouble breathing when you lie down
- Shortness of breath
- A headache
- Dizziness
- Itchiness, especially after a bath or shower
- Red skin, especially in the face
- Numbness, tingling, burning, or weakness in the hands, feet, arms, or legs
- A feeling of fullness in the left upper abdomen

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