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 2005
Polycythemia vera



What is polycythemia vera?
Bernie/ Florida



A. Polycythemia vera is a rare blood disorder in which the bone marrow makes too many red blood cells and occasionally too many white blood cells and platelets. This interferes with normal blood flow, which can lead to blood clots, heart attacks or strokes. The cause of polycythemia vera isn't known. But other causes of an increased red blood cell count include smoking, living at a high altitude and congenital heart conditions.

Polycythemia vera occurs most often in older adults. The disease usually develops slowly. Many people have no symptoms for years. Others may experience nonspecific symptoms, such as:

- Headaches
- Itching
- Dizziness

Because polycythemia vera initially causes no signs or symptoms, it is often found incidentally on blood tests done for some other reason.

There is no cure for polycythemia vera. Treatment is directed at reducing the number of red blood cells and controlling signs and symptoms. Treatment may include:

- Phlebotomy — the periodic removal of blood from a vein to reduce the number of red blood cells
- Low-dose aspirin to prevent blood clots
- Chemotherapy to suppress the bone marrow, such as hydroxyurea

Most people with polycythemia vera live for many years with proper medical care. However, polycythemia may lead to acute myelogenous leukemia.

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By Mayo Clinic Staff

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