



Signs of Hope

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Immune Thrombocytopenic Purpura (ITP): Questions and Answers

WHAT IS ITP?

ITP is an autoimmune disease, which means that the body's immune system goes awry and reacts to an otherwise healthy part of the body.¹ In ITP, the immune system makes antibodies against the body's platelets, which are small cells in the blood that are needed for your blood to clot.¹ This autoimmune process is believed to happen in 2 ways¹:

1. The platelets are treated as foreign cells, coated with antibodies and destroyed by the spleen.
2. The immune system may also damage the cells that make new platelets. This decreases the number of platelets that are produced.

ITP can be either acute or chronic. Acute ITP, most commonly diagnosed in young children, starts suddenly and often goes away after a few weeks or months in most patients. Chronic ITP is more common in adults and often does not go away by itself.¹ There are roughly 200,000 people in the United States with ITP, and approximately 100 new cases of ITP per million people are diagnosed each year.^{1,2}

HOW IS ITP DIAGNOSED?

Sometimes, someone with ITP will have obvious symptoms, like petechiae (tiny red dots on the skin caused by broken blood vessels) or purpura (purple spots on the skin).¹ Some patients will experience large bruises on the arms and legs or increased bleeding in the nose or mouth. These symptoms generally occur because platelet counts are too low.¹ However, many people with ITP have no symptoms, and a doctor discovers the low platelet count as a result of a blood test performed for another reason.³ When someone has a low platelet count, a doctor runs tests to exclude different diseases that might cause platelet counts to drop. ITP is diagnosed when all other causes have been ruled out, and only ITP is left.^{1,4}

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS WITH ITP?

With ITP, the chances of serious bleeding are small, but such bleeding can be potentially life threatening.^{5,6} If platelet counts are very low, it is possible to have internal bleeding or, in rare cases, ruptures in blood vessels in the brain.^{7,8} ITP patients are also at risk of other bleeding symptoms, such as frequent or uncontrolled nose bleeds that are hard to stop, blood in the urine, excessive bleeding when brushing teeth, and heavy menstrual bleeding.^{5,8} People with ITP should talk with their doctor about how often their platelet counts should be monitored.



HOW IS ITP TREATED?

In adults, ITP is often treated by specialists such as hematologists/oncologists (doctors specializing in blood and bone marrow diseases). Common treatments include steroids, intravenous immune globulin, and anti-D, among others.¹ Additionally, new potential treatments are now being tested in clinical trials. Patients with ITP should discuss with their doctors which treatments are appropriate for them.

WHAT HAPPENS TO CHRONIC ITP PATIENTS?

For most children with ITP, the disease usually lasts only a few weeks or months and then goes away, sometimes without treatment.¹ However, in most adults, ITP is usually a chronic condition.¹ The good news is that severe bleeding is extremely rare in ITP.^{5,6}

Because adult ITP is generally a chronic condition, the goal of treatment is not cure. The goal is to achieve a platelet count that can help prevent dangerous bleeding without too much risk from the treatment itself.⁹ Such a platelet count is generally considered to be $>50 \times 10^9/L$. Patients with platelet counts $>50 \times 10^9/L$ may require no treatment, unless they need surgery or experience some trauma.¹ Treatments for ITP may have side effects, so your doctor will work to balance the risks of treatment so that they do not outweigh the benefits.⁹

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE FOR PATIENTS WITH ITP?

Your team of healthcare professionals should always be the first source of information about your disease. There are also support groups and national organizations that may be helpful. Listed below are a few examples:

THE PLATELET DISORDER SUPPORT ASSOCIATION, a nonprofit organization, provides information and support to ITP patients, and encourages research about ITP and other platelet disorders. <http://www.pdsa.org>

PLATELETS ON THE INTERNET provides up-to-date information on ITP (Idiopathic Thrombocytopenic Purpura), TTP-HUS (Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura-Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome), and Drug-Induced Thrombocytopenia. This site is sponsored by the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine. <http://moon.ouhsc.edu/jgeorge>

SCRIPPS ITP EDUCATION provides information on adult chronic ITP and clinical updates on diagnosis and treatment. <http://www.scripps.edu/mem/itp>

THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HEMATOLOGY promotes research, clinical care, education, training, and advocacy for diseases affecting the blood and bone marrow. <http://www.hematology.org>

THE NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE (NHLBI), part of the National Institutes of Health, supports research and educational efforts for blood diseases, including ITP. The link below takes you to an NHLBI site that discusses ITP in patient-friendly language. http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Itp/ITP_Whatsl.html

ITP SUPPORT ASSOCIATION, a UK-registered charity organization, provides useful educational information to ITP patients and their families. <http://www.itpsupport.org.uk/links.htm>

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