



Low White Blood Cell Count Dimock Community Health Center



What are white blood cells (WBCs)?

White blood cells are cells in your blood which fight infections. White blood cells are also called leukocytes. The two main types of white blood cells are neutrophils (or “polys”) and lymphocytes. “Polys” are very important in fighting bacterial infections, while lymphocytes work more against viruses and other infections. CD4 or T cells are a kind of lymphocyte that HIV attacks. With a simple blood test, called the white blood cell count, we can measure the number of WBCs in your blood. There may be problems if your WBC count is too high or too low.

What causes a high WBC count?

A high WBC count can mean that an infection is present and that your body is trying to fight it.

What causes a low WBC count?

HIV itself, other infections or medicines that you take can cause the white blood cell count to drop. If you have too few WBCs, especially neutrophils, you are at risk for getting a serious bacterial infection. Neutropenia is having a low number of neutrophils in your blood. Medicines that can cause neutropenia include AZT, Bactrim, hydroxyurea, and many types of drugs used in chemotherapy. Infections and cancers that affect the bone marrow, where the blood cells are produced, can also cause neutropenia. These include tuberculosis and mycobacterium avium complex (MAC), HIV, and lymphomas.

How do I protect myself if I am neutropenic?

You may not have any symptoms which warn you that you are neutropenic. A blood test can be done which measures the number of WBCs in your blood. The first step to treating this condition is to find out why it is happening. An infection or your medications may be causing the problem.

If you know that you are neutropenic, it is especially important to let your doctor know as soon as possible if you have fever or chills. This could mean that you have an infection and your body may not be able to fight it because of the low white cell count. If the neutropenia is severe, a medicine is available, given as a shot, which can help the bone marrow to make more white blood cells.