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Holiday Bustle is Not the Only Cause of Fatigue

During this busy holiday season, it is not unusual for many people to feel exhausted. For most of us, this fatigue normally is alleviated with a few good nights sleep and the end of the holidays. However, in some rare instances, fatigue may be a symptom of a serious condition called aplastic anemia.

When a person has aplastic anemia, the body stops producing enough new blood cells. There are three types of blood cells, and all can be affected. Red blood cells carry oxygen throughout the body, white blood cells fight infection, and platelets are needed to help clot blood. A reduction in the production of any of these blood components can lead to serious consequences.

As stated, aplastic anemia is a rare condition, affecting only about 2 people out of every million in the United States. It can occur in both males and females of any age, and appears to have multiple causes. Absent one of the known or suspected causes of this disease, there are no known risk factors.

Aplastic anemia may be chronic or acute, and symptoms can range from moderate to severe. There are several types of aplastic anemia, and generally they can be classified as either idiopathic or secondary. Cases of idiopathic aplastic anemia occur sporadically for no known reason, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center. The National Institutes of Health report that the failure to produce all three types of blood cells in idiopathic cases is the result of to injury to the stem cells located in the bone marrow. Scientists suspect that aplastic anemia is an autoimmune process in which the body acts against its own cells.

Cases of secondary, or acquired, aplastic anemia are believed to be caused by a variety of factors. These include chemotherapy, radiation therapy, pregnancy, toxins, drugs, congenital disorders, or a form of lupus.

Whichever form of aplastic anemia develops, it is nearly always a progressive disorder. In addition to fatigue, symptoms include pale skin, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, nose bleeds, easy bruising, frequent or severe infections, prolonged bleeding from injuries, and enlarged lymph nodes. The process of diagnosing aplastic anemia begins with a review of a person's complete medical history and a physical examination, followed by additional blood tests and a bone marrow biopsy.

Not that long ago, aplastic anemia usually was fatal. The good news is that now there are a number of treatments available. While severe aplastic anemia remains a life-threatening condition requiring hospitalization to be treated, moderate and mild cases usually can be treated without hospitalization. Mild and moderate cases often are treated successfully with medication and blood transfusions, but in severe cases, a bone marrow transplant may be required. It must be kept in mind that blood transfusions reduce the symptoms associated with this condition by providing the blood cells that are no longer produced by the patient's own body, but they are not a cure and multiple transfusions are necessary for most people. Bone marrow transplantation is more successful for younger patients than for older ones, and the procedure includes prescribing drugs that will reduce the risk of rejection. If the procedure is successful, it takes the body about 2 to 4 weeks to begin producing new blood cells, so a lengthy hospital stay is

required. If aplastic anemia is not treated or if the treatments fail, the condition typically results in death.

During this special gift-giving season, consider becoming a bone marrow donor. Bone marrow transplants not only help people with aplastic anemia, but also those with other blood diseases, including leukemia and lymphoma. Information about registering as a bone marrow donor is available at the National Marrow Donor Program at www.marrow.org, or by contacting the New England office of the NMDP in West Hartford at 860-561-5501. To learn more about aplastic anemia, visit the web sites of University of Maryland Medical Center at www.umm.edu (1-800-492-5538), the Mayo Clinic at www.mayoclinic.com, and the National Institutes of Health at www.nim.nih.gov. For further information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org, or 860-721-2822.

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