Q&A: How Your Blood Could Help a Cancer Patient

Donated blood is in short supply. That's a problem for many people with cancer.

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Most people don't think much about the state of their local blood supply, but it's often top of mind for people who have cancer. An ongoing shortage of donated blood is prompting blood donation organizations to put out the call for blood donors.

In this conversation with Dr. Sandhya Panch, a hematologist and medical director of transfusion at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, we take a look at how blood supply shortages affect people with cancer, the different types of blood donations and how you can help:

Why is there a shortage of donated blood?

There are a lot of reasons, including COVID surges, holidays and snowstorms that added to existing shortages. We have had to ration the amount of blood products we're giving to patients. For some patients, this directly impacts their care and for some, not so much. More recently, we have experienced some supply chain issues from donation centers.

How can community members help cancer patients who need blood products?

Find out how to become a donor by visiting the website for the Red Cross (enter your ZIP code to find a list of nearby blood drives). People in the Seattle area can learn more on the Bloodworks Northwest website.

In the first two weeks of June, we had a critical platelet shortage, which placed us on high alert. There just weren't enough donors available. Unlike other products, you can't just bring in blood products across state lines; there are regulations around these sorts of transportation logistics. Typically we rely pretty heavily on our local supply.

Sometimes we need to ration platelets to ensure the patients who are experiencing more severe internal bleeding can receive them. That can mean that we have to decide to give half-units of platelets to some patients with low blood counts but no active bleeding and reserve full units for patients who need them the most.

How much blood does Fred Hutch go through each month?

On average, our patients with cancer use 500 units of red blood cells and 350 units of platelets each month.

What are the different kinds of blood donations?

For the most part, blood donors contribute red blood cells and platelets.

What are blood platelets?

Platelets are blood cells that help blood clot. People with cancer can have low platelet counts. Platelet donation for people with cancer has dramatically decreased deaths due to bleeding.

Why do people with cancer need platelets?

People with cancer need platelets and red blood cells and occasionally white blood cells, which are more difficult to collect, to restore their blood count to healthy levels or to fight infections.

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