



After a Leukemia Diagnosis



Leukemia is a cancer of the blood cells that starts in the bone marrow (a spongy tissue at the center of most bones). Bone marrow is where new blood cells are made. If you have been told you have leukemia, you've probably already had blood tests and a bone marrow biopsy (a test that takes some tissue to check for cancer). Other tests might have been done on the cancer cells to check for certain proteins and gene changes called biomarkers. You might also have other procedures. These tests help your doctor know what type of leukemia you have and what treatment is best for you.

Types of leukemia

Leukemia is known as a liquid cancer. It doesn't usually form a solid tumor like most cancers.

There are many types of leukemia. It can be fast growing (**acute**) or slower growing (**chronic**). It starts in the **myeloid** blood cells or in the **lymphocytic** blood cells.

The most common types of leukemia are:

- Acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL)
- Acute myeloid leukemia (AML)
- Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL)
- Chronic myeloid leukemia (CML)
- Chronic myelomonocytic leukemia (CMML)

Adults can have acute or chronic leukemia of either the myeloid or lymphocytic type. Children and teenagers most often have acute leukemia of either type. Some leukemias have subtypes and phases. This tells doctors how advanced it is and what treatment might work best. Your doctor can tell you more about your leukemia.

Treatment for leukemia

There are many ways to treat leukemia. Your treatment will depend on the type, subtype, and phase of your cancer, and on other health problems you might have.

Acute leukemia

Most types of acute leukemia are very serious. Treatment needs to start right away. It is often intense and long, and usually lasts about 2 years.

Treatment most often starts with intravenous chemotherapy (IV chemo). Other treatments could be added, like targeted drug therapy. A stem cell transplant might be used after the first round of treatment.

Treatment for children can be different than for adults.

Chronic leukemia

Not all types of chronic leukemia need to be treated right away. If treatment is needed, chemo, targeted drug therapy, or stem cell transplant may be recommended.

Be sure to ask:

- What type of leukemia do I have?
- What subtype and phase is it? What does that mean?
- What else have you learned from my test results?
- Will I need more tests or biomarker testing?
- What is the goal of treatment?
- What are my treatment options? What do you think is best for me and why?
- Would a stem cell transplant work for me?
- Are there any clinical trials for my type of leukemia?

What to expect before and during treatment

The doctor who treats your leukemia might be a hematologist (blood doctor) or an oncologist (cancer doctor). Depending on the type of treatment you need, your cancer care team could include different doctors, nurses, and other health care workers.

For example, if you need chemo, you will go through phases or cycles of treatment with tests and check-ups in between. Your cancer care team will help you understand what to expect before, during, and after each phase of treatment. They will explain how it is given, help you get ready for it, keep track of how you're doing, and help you manage any side effects. You will also get blood tests, scans, or other tests at certain times to see how well your treatment is working.

Not everyone going through treatment for leukemia has the same side effects. For example, the side effects of chemo are different from the side effects of targeted therapy.

It's common to have changes in your blood cell counts during treatment for leukemia. This can make you more likely to get infections. You may also feel very weak and tired at times. If you're getting high-dose chemo, this could make your side effects worse.

Be sure to ask:

- What side effects might I have? What can I do about them? Do you expect them to be serious?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How often will I get treatment? How long will it last?
- Where will my treatment be given? If I will be in the hospital, how long will I stay?
- Will I be able to keep doing my usual activities?
- What special precautions do I need to take?

What to expect after treatment

After treatment, your doctor will help you manage any side effects you may have. You will also have many exams and tests to check for leukemia cells.

For some people, leukemia might not go away completely. They might continue to get treatment, and tests will still be needed to see how well it's working.

People who've had leukemia are at risk of having it again or getting certain other types of cancer. Even if you feel fine after finishing treatment, it's important to ask about a regular schedule for follow-up tests to check if your leukemia has come back.

Be sure to ask:

- How often do I need to see my cancer care team?
- When and how should I contact them?
- Will I need more blood tests and bone marrow biopsies? How often do I need them?

- Will I need other tests to see if my cancer has come back, or to check for problems from my treatment?
- Are there possible late or long-term side effects?
- Do I need screening tests to find other cancers early?
- Where can I find my medical records?

Staying healthy

Be sure to tell your doctor or cancer care team if any treatment side effects don't go away or if you have any new symptoms.

There are things you can do to help keep yourself healthy during and after treatment. This includes eating well, being active, getting to and staying at a healthy weight, and not smoking. You might feel weak and tired at times. Staying active can help. Leukemia can make you more prone to infections, so you'll need to watch for signs and protect yourself from people who are sick. Ask your cancer care team about the signs of infection, and how to manage your fatigue and other symptoms.

Dealing with your feelings

Having leukemia might make you feel isolated, scared, sad, or nervous. It's normal to have these feelings, and there are ways to help you cope with them.

- Don't try to deal with your feelings by yourself. Talk about them, no matter what they are.
- It's OK to feel sad or down once in a while, but let your cancer care team know if you have these feelings for more than a few days.
- If your doctor says it's OK, continue doing things you enjoy like spending time outdoors, going to a movie or sporting event, or going out to dinner.
- Get help with tasks like cooking and cleaning.

You might want to reach out to friends, family, or religious leaders or groups. Counseling or a support group can also help. Tell your cancer care team how you are feeling. They can help you find the right support.



For more information and support, visit the American Cancer Society website at cancer.org/leukemia or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.

