

Evidence Summary: Patient Navigation for Patients With Blood Cancer

Introduction

Blood cancers represent a large and diverse group of malignancies that affect how blood cells are formed and function. While broadly classified as leukemia, lymphoma, and myeloma, each category comprises numerous subtypes with distinct biology, differing in how quickly they grow, which cells they affect, and how they behave clinically.¹ These subtypes span from highly aggressive types requiring urgent, intensive therapy to chronic, slow-progressing types requiring lifelong monitoring, with many subtypes falling between these extremes. Patients with a blood cancer diagnosis experience significant changes in quality of life, and have unique unmet supportive care needs.^{2,3}

Patient navigation has been shown to improve patient outcomes, quality of life, and access to care, especially for under-resourced populations.^{4,5} This community- and clinic-based intervention may also improve cost-effectiveness across the cancer care continuum.⁵ For patients with blood cancer and their caregivers, patient navigation may help them reach vital supportive care resources throughout their cancer journey. Supportive care addresses the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs of patients, their caregivers, and family members. It can include pain management, nutritional support, counseling, palliative care, and more.^{6,7} A patient's needs can vary widely based on factors such as age, gender, cancer type, marital status, and other individual circumstances.⁸ These needs can also change and compound over the course of treatment and care.⁹

This evidence summary builds a compelling, evidence-based case for patient navigation in blood cancer care while also offering focused insight to help oncology professionals – including physicians, nurses, advanced practice providers, social workers, navigators, and psychosocial specialists – to better understand the complex challenges experienced by individuals with blood cancer.

Organized across five key supportive care domains, this summary synthesizes research highlighting the significant and urgent supportive care needs of people with blood cancer and their caregivers.

These domains include:

- **Disease and treatment education**
- **Financial and logistical support**
- **Palliative care**
- **Psychosocial support**
- **Caregiver support**

Domains

Disease and Treatment Education

Patient navigation plays a key role in supporting blood cancer patients and their caregivers by providing and connecting them with much-needed education about their disease and treatment.

- A recent survey found that patients with blood cancer have high health information needs. They are especially interested in treatment and self-care topics, with nutrition being the highest ranked.¹⁰
- A literature review found that patients with blood cancer expressed a greater need for basic medical information about their disease – diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, etc. – than psychosocial information.¹¹
- In a recent study investigating the social needs of patients with multiple myeloma, 50% of participants reported that a lack of health knowledge about their disease, especially at the time of diagnosis, negatively impacted their care.¹²

Financial and Logistical Support

Patient navigation can help connect patients with blood cancer to resources that may help them access and afford care.

- Financial toxicity is common in patients with blood cancer. They often face higher treatment costs due to longer hospital stays and expensive anticancer drug therapy.^{13,14}
- Research has found that financial toxicity in patients with blood cancer has been linked to poorer outcomes and reduced survival.^{13,15}
- Patients with blood cancer who reported financial toxicity had improved quality of life and mental health after an intervention that included meeting with a nurse navigator to discuss the cost of their care.^{15,16}
- In a recent study of young adult blood cancer survivors (ages 18 to 39 years), nearly half (49%) of participants reported severe or high financial distress, including food and housing insecurity. Those most likely to have financial problems were women, those of Hispanic ethnicity, and those with a lower income.¹⁷
- A recent study showed that older adults (ages 75 years and older) with blood cancer have a variety of supportive care needs, including free transportation, meals, delivery services, home maintenance, and financial assistance.¹⁸

Palliative Care

Patient navigation can help identify palliative care needs and support patients with blood cancer by referring them to palliative care services.

- Compared with patients who have other cancer types, patients with blood cancer are less likely to receive palliative care. And if they do receive palliative care services, they are often started later in the course of their disease.^{9,19,20}
- Patients with blood cancer have many palliative care needs. They often face serious physical and emotional symptom burdens throughout their cancer journey, including fatigue, sleep problems, pain, nausea, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.^{9,21,22}
- Research has found that integrated palliative care can improve the quality of life for patients with blood cancer during treatment. It can reduce side effects from the disease and its treatment, as well as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms.^{21,22}
- Survivors of blood cancer continue to have palliative care needs. After treatment, they often navigate long-term side effects and quality-of-life issues, such as fatigue, pain, infertility, and fear of cancer recurrence.^{9,21,22}

Psychosocial Support

Patient navigation can help address the emotional and mental health needs of patients with blood cancer by referring them to psychosocial support services.

- In a pilot study, patients with blood cancer who were screened for distress reported high levels of anxiety and depression, indicating a strong need for psychosocial support.^{23,24}
- Patients with blood cancer who have a history of anxiety and depression are more likely to suffer from distress during treatment and would benefit from timely support to help support their mental health.²⁵
- A high level of distress in patients with blood cancer is closely correlated with a lower quality of life. Distressed patients most often report fatigue, appetite loss, and insomnia.²⁴
- A recent study found that depression is linked to reduced overall survival in patients with blood cancer, emphasizing the need for psychological screening and early treatment.²⁶

Caregiver Support

Patient navigation can help support caregivers of patients with blood cancer by connecting them to valuable resources that can address psychosocial and financial needs.

- Research shows that family caregivers of patients with blood cancer often suffer from negative health effects, including trouble sleeping, emotional distress, social isolation, anxiety, and depression.²⁷⁻²⁹
- One study found that caregivers were more likely than the patient receiving a bone marrow transplant to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, suggesting distress may affect caregivers more than blood cancer patients.³⁰
- Family caregivers of patients with blood cancer face significant financial strain, including work disruption, loss of income, and high out-of-pocket costs for care.^{27,29}
- Research has found that caregivers of patients with blood cancer may struggle to adapt during treatment and survivorship transitions, indicating a need for continued supportive care.³¹

Summary

Patients and their caregivers navigating care for blood cancer benefit from multidisciplinary care, including supportive and palliative care services. Blood cancer care requires a team that includes patients and caregivers to address financial, psychosocial, and palliative care needs during and after treatment. Patient navigation plays a critical role in identifying and providing support and referrals to address these significant and urgent supportive care needs. For more information about patient navigation, visit the [ACS National Navigation Roundtable website](#).

This resource was developed by the [ACS Hematologic Cancer Collaborative](#).

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