Chemo-immunotherapy

Sometimes, patients also take drugs called monoclonal antibodies alongside the chemotherapy drugs. These are artificial antibodies which can bind to and kill specific cells. Treatment using a combination of chemotherapy drugs and antibodies is called chemo-immunotherapy.

Stem cell transplants

In some people, leukaemia is best cured by having a stem cell transplant. This is where a patient receives chemotherapy to reduce the leukaemia in their bone marrow, then receives blood stem cells from another healthy individual (a donor).

Supportive care

As well as the active treatment you'll receive to reduce the leukaemia, some patients also have a type of treatment called supportive care. Supportive care is treatment to reduce infections, provide blood and platelet transfusions, and, in some cases, medicines to reduce bruising and bleeding.

Palliative care

Some patients might also be put in touch with a palliative care team. They are experts in managing your symptoms, improving your quality of life and helping you take care of your general health. They are able to support both you and family members.

Potential side effects from chemotherapy

Specific types of chemotherapy drugs might have different side effects. It's best to talk to your healthcare team about any potential side effects of any chemotherapy drugs you might be taking.

Short term side effects

You may experience some short term side effects from chemotherapy treatment. They could include:

- Achy flu-like feeling
- Constipation
- Diarrhoea
- Bruising and bleeding
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Hair loss
- Infections
- Rashes
- Sore mouth or mouth ulcers
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abnormalities of liver function (this does not cause symptoms usually, but sometimes people may become jaundiced).

Long term side effects

With any type of chemotherapy, there's always, at least, a small risk of long term side effects. These could include problems with the thyroid, heart or lung. The risk of long term side effects will depend on how many cycles of treatment you've had, the treatment intensity and whether you've had a transplant or not. Every patient is different, so your healthcare team will talk to you about this in more detail.

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Patient Guide Series

What is Leukaemia

Shaukat Khanum
Memorial Cancer Hospital
and Research Centre

What is Leukaemia

Leukaemia is a type of blood cancer that mostly affects blood cells - usually white blood cells. These cells are an important part of your immune system that fight infection. Leukaemia is divided into two main groups:

Acute leukaemias:

Develop quickly. These include ALL, AML

Chronic leukaemias

Develop more slowly.
Each kind of leukaemia is different and will need to be treated differently. The information in this section is about leukaemia generally.

People with leukaemia have large numbers of abnormal blood cells, which take over their bone marrow and spill out into their bloodstream. In many cases, we still do not know what causes leukaemia.

What are the symptoms of Laeukemia?

If you are diagnosed with leukaemia, there are some signs and symptoms which you may see or feel before your diagnosis.

It is important to remember that not everyone will get all, or even any, of these symptoms. Each individual is different, and will have a different experience. Some symptoms are common across lots of different types of leukaemia. These are listed below – but do not forget that you would not necessarily get all of these symptoms.

Fatigue

- Tiredness that lasts a long time and does not get better with sleep or rest
- Breathlessness, even at rest.
- Chest pain

Infections

You might get infections more often than usual, even if there are no clear signs of an infection.

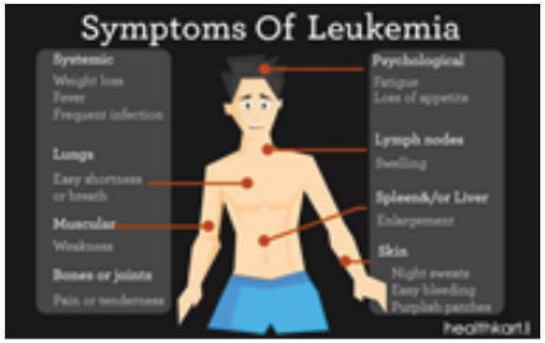
Unexplained weight loss or loss of appetite

Bruising or bleeding

Easy bruise ability or unexpected bleeding from like gums or nose, or seeing blood in your stools

Swollen lymph nodes (glands)

Enlarged glands, which you may notice in your neck but they could be in several places around your body, such as your armpit or groin.



You should have a set of tests to confirm whether you have leukaemia or not. It can be hard to understand how doctors know you have leukaemia, when there is often nothing like a lump you can see, as you might get with other cancers.

Your doctors diagnose leukaemia by looking at your blood, your bone marrow and other relevant tests.

Complete blood count

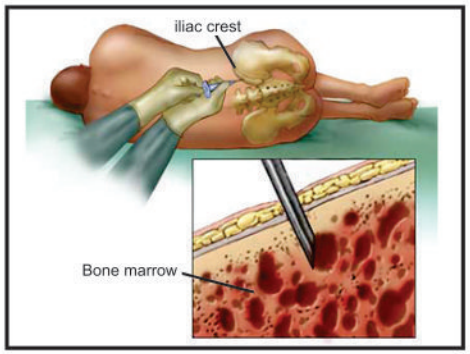
A Complete Blood Count (CBC) measures the number of each type of cell in the blood: red cells, white cells and platelets.

If your FBC shows that you might have leukaemia, you'll need to go to hospital for more tests.

A blood film is taken from a sample of your blood, which your doctor or hospital team use to look at your blood cells under a microscope. This allows them to see if you have any leukaemia cells in your blood. A rise of white blood cells to 3-4 times of its normal count with blast cells on peripheral film will be seen.

Bone marrow aspirate and trephine

In most cases, your doctor will also take a bone marrow sample to see how your blood is working inside your bone marrow. Bone marrow tests provide information about the structure of the marrow and the number and distribution of the different blood cell types – and cancer cells, if present.



Immunophenotyping and cytogenetics

Sometimes you might have genetic tests. These tests are called immunophenotyping and cytogenetics. This genetic information helps your healthcare team decide on suitable treatment options, which they shall discuss with you.

Treatment types

1-Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is used to kill cells and stop them dividing. Although this type of treatment is aimed at the cancer cells, the treatment also affects normal cells which divide quickly, like the hair and gut. If you have chemotherapy. You might take a single drug or a combination of different drugs. Sometimes these will be given in your vein (intravenously) or sometimes you will need to take tablets. You will usually have several courses (sometimes called blocks or cycles) of chemotherapy during your treatment.