

About My Diagnosis

Acute Myeloid Leukemia

What is Acute Myeloid Leukemia?

Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) is a type of blood cancer. It affects the blood and the soft tissue found inside the bones, called the bone marrow. Normal bone marrow produces different types of good cells to keep us alive. In AML however, abnormal blood cells can be found in the bone marrow called 'blasts'. These abnormal cells do not function properly and can multiply in huge numbers, preventing normal cells developing. They can occupy the bone marrow and spill over in the veins and travel all over the body. When this happens, you may feel unwell and experience problems in important parts of the body like the liver, spleen or the brain.

In AML, the abnormal cells can grow very fast within a very short period of time. This is why it is called acute. The word 'myeloid', on the other hand, indicates which part of the blood cell type it comes from.

What are the Causes of Acute Myeloid Leukemia?

We do not really know why AML happens to some people and not to others. Research studies are currently happening to find the cause and cure for AML.

There are some things that may increase your chances of getting ALL. These risk factors do not cause AML, however may increase the chances of getting AML.

Some known risk factors:

- Previous chemotherapy treatment
- Exposure to radiation
- Exposure to strong chemicals such as benzene
- Abnormalities in your blood that you inherited from a parent

What are the Signs and Symptoms of Acute Myeloid Leukemia?

Early signs and symptoms of AML are similar to those caused by flu or other common diseases. Common symptoms of AML are:

- Fever on and off
- Unusual bruising or bleeding
- Unexplained shortness of breath
- Flat, pinpoint red spots under the skin
- Unexplained loss of weight
- Lost appetite
- Feeling tired and weak all the time

If you have any of the symptoms mentioned or are worried of your health, please see your primary healthcare doctor for advice. It is important to remember that AML will not get better on its own without help or treatment.

How will I Know if I Have Acute Myeloid Leukemia?

If you have any of the signs and symptoms mentioned above, it is important that you see a doctor. A small blood test is usually taken to check the number and level of your blood cells. This is called a blood count. It may take two or more days before you will get the result.

In most cases, there is nothing to worry about. However, if you were found to have AML or your blood result is not very clear then, you will be asked to undertake further tests.

What Other Tests Do I Have to Do if My Doctor Suspects Acute Myeloid Leukemia?

Bone marrow procedure

This test involves taking a small sample of marrow and bone from the hip. The bone marrow sample will help check for abnormalities and will help tell if the other blood cells in the marrow are affected. If you are feeling anxious, please let your nurse or doctor know. You may be given medication to help you sleep while having this procedure done.

Scan

Your doctor will arrange for you to have a scan if necessary. The scan will take images of your body to help tell us if other parts of your body are involved. This is a painless procedure.

Ultrasound

You may be asked to have ultrasound. This procedure also takes pictures of body parts using sound pressure. This is painless procedure and will not cause any discomfort.

Chest X-ray

This will help determine the general condition of your chest. In ALL, the leukemia cells can swell and grow in the center of the chest and around the heart. A chest x-ray can help tell if there is a cluster of leukemia cells.

Thinking About Treatment

Acute Myeloid Leukemia

What is the Treatment for Acute Myeloid Leukemia?

Chemotherapy

The treatment of choice for Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) is chemotherapy. It can be given through the veins and can also be taken by mouth. Chemotherapy can kill the abnormal cells and some of the normal cells. It is usually used in combination with other chemotherapy medications for maximum effect. There are several known types of chemotherapy combinations to treat AML. The chemotherapy protocol or combinations will be based on international standards of treatment. What this means is that you will be receiving the same chemotherapy that patients with the same condition in other parts of the world receive.

Chemotherapy is given over a certain period of time. This period is called a cycle or course. One cycle is usually between 21 to 28 days. The whole treatment may last from four to six months. You may be asked to stay in hospital for at least two weeks when having your chemotherapy. You will then be allowed to go home and asked to come back for your next cycle of chemotherapy.

Chemotherapy Side Effects

Like any other medications, chemotherapy has known side effects like anemia and poor immune system. Your clinical nurse specialist and doctor will talk to you about this in detail.

Stem Cell Transplant

Some patients may also be suitable for stem cell transplantation. This is will be discussed with you if this treatment is applicable for you.