

# ASCO ANSWERS

## CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA

### WHAT IS CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA?

Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) is a disease in which lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell, grow abnormally and build up in the body. CLL is the most common type of leukemia in adults. The B-cell type of CLL is most common; T-cell CLL is less common and grows and progresses more rapidly.

### WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF LYMPHOCYTES?

Lymphocytes are found in the blood, lymph nodes, bone marrow (spongy tissue inside of bones), spleen, and lymph (a clear fluid that collects in lymph nodes). B lymphocytes make antibodies to fight infections. T lymphocytes help fight infections by killing viruses and foreign cells, as well as triggering B cells and other cells in the immune system to make antibodies.

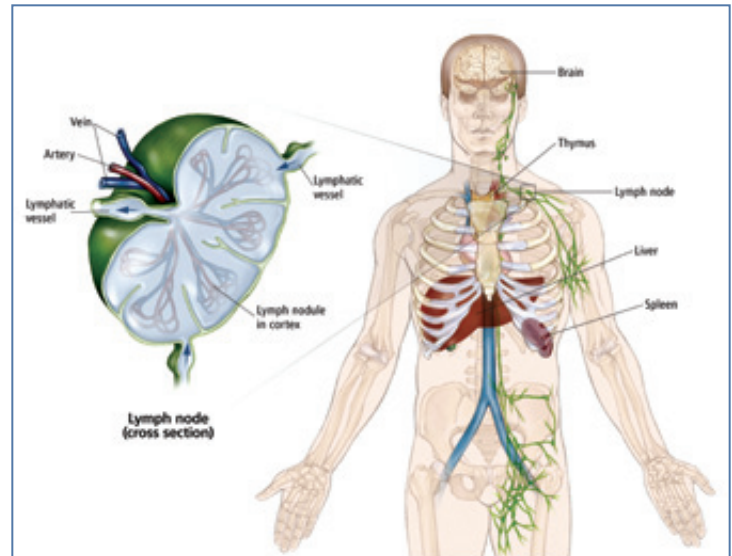


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Find additional cancer information at [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net).

### WHAT DOES STAGE MEAN?

Staging is a way of describing the extent of a cancer, such as where it is located, if or where it has spread, and if it is affecting the functions of other organs in the body. The Rai staging system divides CLL into different stages ranging from 0 (zero) to IV (four). Three risk groups—low risk, intermediate risk, and high risk—are used to express the likelihood that the disease may worsen. More information is available at [www.cancer.net/cll](http://www.cancer.net/cll).

### HOW IS CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA TREATED?

The treatment of CLL depends on the patient's stage, risk status, and overall health. Although treatment is often effective, no standard therapy can eliminate CLL. The goal of treatment is long-term remission. Because CLL develops slowly in about half of these patients, active surveillance (watchful waiting) may be recommended. For patients who have symptoms or worsening blood counts, treatment is recommended. Patients who receive chemotherapy are often given the drug fludarabine (Fludara), although a combination of drugs may be used. Monoclonal antibodies, which can kill CLL cells, may also be used. Radiation therapy and supportive therapies, such as blood transfusions, antibiotics, or surgery to remove an enlarged spleen, can help treat or control CLL symptoms. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of CLL treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team.

### HOW CAN I COPE WITH CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your doctor are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, becoming organized, and considering a second opinion are other steps. Take care of yourself during this time. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK THE DOCTOR

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your doctors:

- What type of CLL do I have?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage or risk group is the CLL?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?
- What is the goal of each treatment?
- Do I need to start treatment right away? If not, could you please explain why not?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom do I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at [www.cancer.net/cll](http://www.cancer.net/cll).



Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®

**For more information, visit ASCO's patient website, [www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net), or call 888-651-3038.**

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Active surveillance:

Monitoring a patient with tests and physical examinations; active treatment begins only when the cancer shows signs of worsening

### Bone marrow biopsy:

Removal and analysis of a bone marrow sample from the center of the bones

### Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

### Clinical trial:

A research study that tests a new treatment or drug

### Hematologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating blood disorders

### Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

### Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where the cancer began to another part of the body

### Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating people with cancer

### Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

### Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

### Remission:

The absence of any signs or symptoms of disease