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Waldenström's Macroglobulinemia - Overview [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 12/2014

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net's Guide to Waldenstrom's Macroglobulinemia. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia is a type of [non-Hodgkin lymphoma \(NHL\)](#) [3] that affects small lymphocytes, which are white blood cells.

About lymphoma and the lymph system

NHL is a term that refers to many types of cancer of the lymphatic system, which can have different symptoms and signs, physical findings, and treatment options.

The lymphatic system is made up of thin tubes that branch out to all parts of the body and helps fight infection. The lymphatic system carries lymph, a colorless fluid containing lymphocytes. Lymphocytes fight germs in the body. B-lymphocytes, also called B cells, make antibodies to fight bacteria. T-lymphocytes, or T cells, kill viruses and foreign cells and trigger the B cells to make antibodies.

Groups of bean-shaped organs called lymph nodes are located throughout the body at different sites in the lymphatic system. Lymph nodes are found in clusters in the abdomen, groin, pelvis, underarms, and neck. Other parts of the lymphatic system include the spleen, which makes lymphocytes and filters blood; the thymus, an organ under the breastbone; and the tonsils, located in the throat.

About Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia

Lymphoma begins when cells in the lymphatic system change and grow uncontrollably, which may form a tumor.

In Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia, the lymphocytes are similar in shape to plasma cells. Plasma cells make antibodies, which are specialized proteins that help make viruses and bacteria harmless to the body. Specifically, plasma cells make an antibody called immunoglobulin M (IgM). Another name for Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia is lymphoplasmacytic lymphoma. It is classified as an indolent, or low-grade, type of lymphoma. Learn more about the [subtypes of NHL](#) [4].

Because lymphatic tissue is found in so many parts of the body, Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia can start almost anywhere and may spread to almost any organ in the body. When people are first diagnosed with the disease, it has usually already spread to the blood and bone marrow. It may also eventually affect the lymph nodes, liver, or spleen, as well as the stomach, intestines, and lungs. Rarely, Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia spreads to the skin or thyroid gland.

Looking for More of an Overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore these related items. Please note these links take you to other sections on Cancer.Net:

- [ASCO Answers Fact Sheet](#) [5]: Read a one-page fact sheet, available in PDF, that offers an easy-to-print introduction to NHL.
- [Cancer.Net Patient Education Video](#) [6]: View a short video led by an ASCO expert in lymphoma that provides basic information and areas of research. Watch this [video that describes](#) [7] the different categories of Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma.

To continue reading this guide, use the menu on the side of your screen to select another section.

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/waldenstrom%E2%80%99s-macroglobulinemia/overview>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31269>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19210>

[5] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/asco_answers_nhl.pdf

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/27381>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/27061>