Waldenström's Macroglobulinemia

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Overview

Waldenström?s macroglobulinemia is a type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma [2] (NHL) that affects small lymphocytes (white blood cells).

About lymphoma and the lymph system

Non-Hodgkin lymphoma (NHL) is a term that refers to many types of cancer of the lymph system, which can have different symptoms and signs, physical findings, and treatment strategies.

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

Groups of bean-shaped organs called lymph nodes are located throughout the body at different sites in the lymph system. Lymph nodes are found in clusters in the abdomen, groin, pelvis, underarms, and neck. Other parts of the lymph 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 Waldenström?s macroglobulinemia

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

In Waldenström?s macroglobulinemia, the lymphocytes are similar in shape to plasma cells (cells that produce antibodies, specialized proteins that neutralize viruses and bacteria) and make an antibody called immunoglobulin M (IgM). Another name for this rare disorder is lymphoplasmacytic lymphoma. It is classified as an indolent (low-grade) type of lymphoma. Learn more about the subtypes of NHL [3].

Because lymph tissue is found in so many parts of the body, Waldenström?s macroglobulinemia can start almost anywhere and may spread to almost any organ in the body. At the time of diagnosis it most commonly involves the blood and bone marrow, but may eventually affect the lymph nodes, liver, or spleen, as well as the stomach, intestines, and lungs. Rarely, Waldenström?s macroglobulinemia involves the skin or thyroid gland.

Find out more about basic cancer terms used in this section [4].

Looking for More of an Overview?

If you would like additional introductory information, explore these related items on Cancer.Net:

- *ASCO Answers* Fact Sheet [5]: Read a one-page fact sheet (available in PDF) that offers an easy-to-print introduction for non-Hodgkin lymphoma.
- 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.

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Links:
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