

Multiple Myeloma

What is multiple myeloma?

Myeloma is a cancer of the plasma cells in the bone marrow, the spongy tissue inside of bones. Myeloma begins when healthy plasma cells in the bone marrow change and grow out of control. Myeloma often damages the bone and is usually called multiple myeloma because most people have multiple bone lesions, meaning areas of damaged tissue, at the time it is diagnosed.

What is the function of plasma cells?

Plasma cells are a part of the body's immune system and produce antibodies that help the body fight infection. Like healthy plasma cells, myeloma cells also produce antibodies. However, myeloma cells also crowd out or suppress the growth of other cells in the bone marrow that produce red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

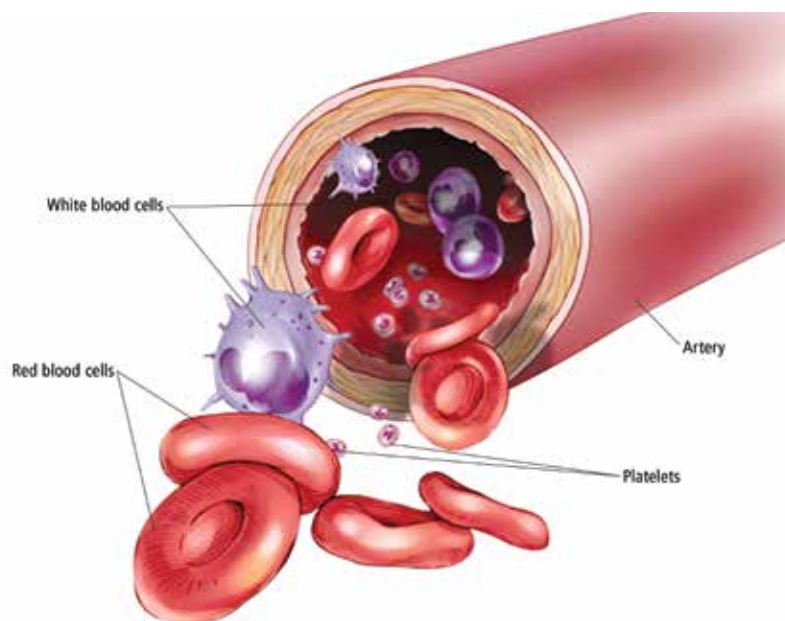


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What does stage mean?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. Myeloma is usually staged using the International Staging System (ISS). There are 3 stages defined by levels of certain proteins in the blood. It is helpful for determining a patient's prognosis. The Durie-Salmon System is another system that has been used to stage myeloma. It uses 3 stages to describe the size of the tumor and/or the spread of the disease. Find more information about these stages at www.cancer.net/myeloma.

How is multiple myeloma treated?

The treatment of multiple myeloma depends on whether the person is experiencing symptoms and the person's overall health. Active surveillance or watchful waiting may be appropriate for patients with early-stage myeloma and no symptoms. If symptoms appear, then active treatment would begin. For patients with symptoms, disease-directed treatment typically includes targeted therapy or chemotherapy, with or without steroids. Stem cell/bone marrow transplantation may be an option. Other types of treatments, such as radiation therapy and surgery, are used in specific circumstances. Most patients also receive monthly infusions of bisphosphonate therapy to help prevent bone disease. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options and the goals of each treatment. The side effects of myeloma treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team. This is called palliative care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

How can I cope with multiple myeloma?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your health care team are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, organizing your health information, making sure all of your questions are answered, and participating in the decision-making process are other steps. Talk with your health care team about any concerns. 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 health care team

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

- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- Am I symptomatic or asymptomatic? What does this mean?
- What stage is the myeloma? What does this mean?
- Is my kidney function being affected?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are available for me? Where are they located, and how do I find out more about them?
- Is active surveillance (watchful waiting) an appropriate option for me?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- What treatment options can help reduce or manage my symptoms?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs of cancer care, who can help me?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/myeloma.

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WORDS TO KNOW

Active surveillance/ watchful waiting:

Closely monitoring a patient through checkups and only starting treatment if the disease progresses

Anemia:

A low level of red blood cells

Bisphosphonate:

A drug that helps increase bone density

Bone marrow biopsy:

Removal and analysis of a tissue sample from the center of the bones

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Hematologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating blood disorders

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Maintenance therapy:

Treating cancer with drugs to prevent it from spreading or coming back

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

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

Targeted therapy:

Treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth

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