

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.

■ 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.

■ What does stage mean?

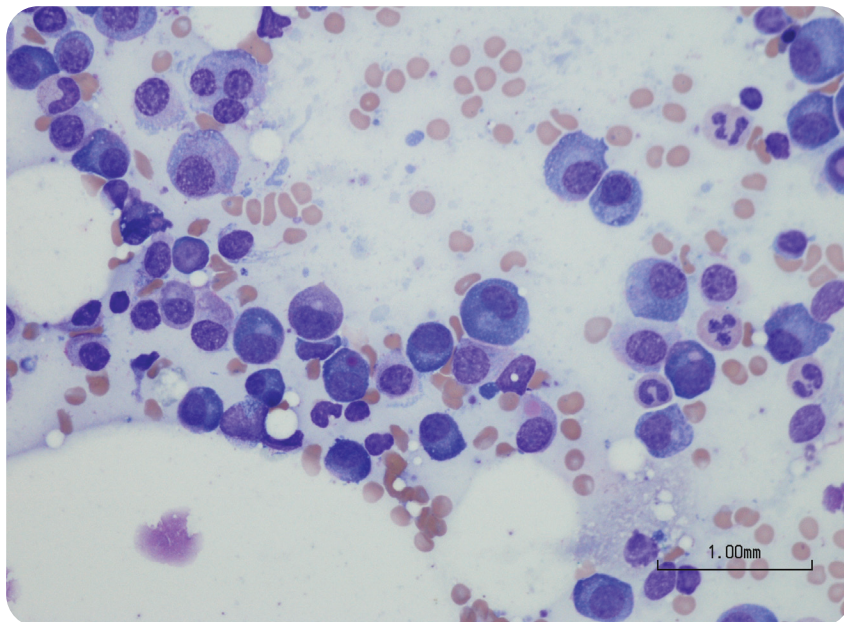
Unlike other cancers, the stage of myeloma does not always reflect the size or the spread of the cancer. Myeloma is usually staged using the Revised International Staging System (R-ISS). There are 3 stages, defined by levels of certain proteins in the blood as well as other important risk factors, including genetics of the plasma cells. Together, all this information may be used to help choose a treatment plan or for predicting whether certain treatments will work. Find more information at www.cancer.net/myeloma.

■ How is multiple myeloma treated?

The treatment of multiple myeloma depends on the stage, whether the person is experiencing symptoms, and the person's overall health. Active surveillance or watchful waiting may be appropriate for people with early-stage (or "smoldering") myeloma and no symptoms. If symptoms appear, then active treatment would begin. For people with symptoms, disease-directed treatment typically includes targeted therapy or chemotherapy, with or without steroids. Immunomodulatory drugs, immunotherapy, and stem cell/bone marrow transplantation may be other options. Other types of treatments, such as radiation therapy and surgery, are used in specific circumstances. Most people also receive 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. Clinical trials are an option to consider for treatment and care for all stages of cancer. 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 or supportive 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. It can be helpful to bring someone along to your appointments to take notes.

Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- ▶ 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?
- ▶ If I have a question or problem, who should I call?

Find more questions to ask the health care team at www.cancer.net/myeloma.

For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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 a bone.

Chemotherapy: The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells.

Hematologist: A doctor who specializes in treating blood disorders.

Lymph node: A small, 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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