

Understanding

Acute myeloid leukaemia (AML)

Caring for people with cancer

Understanding

Acute myeloid leukaemia (AML)

This booklet has information on:

- Treatment for AML
- Side-effects and how to manage them
- Coping with the emotional side of cancer
- Financial and practical matters

Useful numbers

Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS)

Advanced Nurse Practitioner (ANP)

Family doctor (GP)

Haematologist

Medical oncologist

Radiation oncologist

Medical social worker

Hospital day ward

Out-of-hours contact number

Emergency number

Hospital records number (MRN)

Electronic health record (EHR) number



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Fast facts

Can AML be treated?

Page 29

Yes. Treatment for acute myeloid leukaemia aims to destroy the leukaemia cells and allow the bone marrow to work normally again. When this happens, it is called remission. Some people stay in remission and the person is said to be cured. Treatment starts as soon as possible, as AML is a fast-growing cancer.

Will I be OK?

Page 27

What is likely to happen to you (your prognosis) is hard to predict. It depends on a lot of things, such as your age and general health. It's best to ask your consultant about your own situation.

What treatment might I have?

Page 45

Depending on your age and general health you may have intensive chemotherapy along with other types of drugs and maybe a stem cell transplant to put the disease into remission. If you are not suitable for intensive treatment, you will have low-dose chemotherapy or different drug therapies, perhaps as part of a clinical trial.

How will my cancer and treatment affect me?

Page 45

All treatments, particularly intensive chemotherapy, can cause side-effects. Read about the treatments to learn more about their possible side-effects.

There are treatments to help with most side-effects, so tell your doctor or nurse. Don't suffer in silence!

Clinical trials

Page 68

Clinical trials are research studies that try to find new or better ways of treating cancer or reducing side-effects. Ask your consultant if there are any trials suitable for you in your treating centre, nationally or internationally.

We're here for you

Page 110

If you or your family have any questions or worries, want to know where to get support, or if you just need to talk, you can talk to one of our cancer nurses.

Ways to get in touch

- Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700
- Drop in to a Daffodil Centre. Email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie to find your local Daffodil Centre.
- Email us: supportline@irishcancer.ie

See page 110 for more about our services.

Reading this booklet



This booklet is to help you throughout your cancer treatment and afterwards. You will probably find different sections useful at different times, so keep it for reference.

If you need more information or don't understand something, ask your doctor or nurse. You can also ask one of our cancer nurses:

- Call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700
- Visit a Daffodil Centre
- Email the nurses at supportline@irishcancer.ie

We cannot give advice about the best treatment for you. Talk to your hospital team about your treatment and care – they know your medical history and your individual circumstances.

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Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

What is leukaemia?

Leukaemia is a cancer that affects blood cells. To understand leukaemia, it helps to understand a bit about how blood cells are made.

About blood cells

Your body has 3 main types of blood cells:

Red blood cells carry oxygen to all the tissues in your body.

White blood cells are involved in fighting infection. Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell that protect you from infection; they are the most common type of white blood cells in your body.

Platelets are involved in blood clotting.

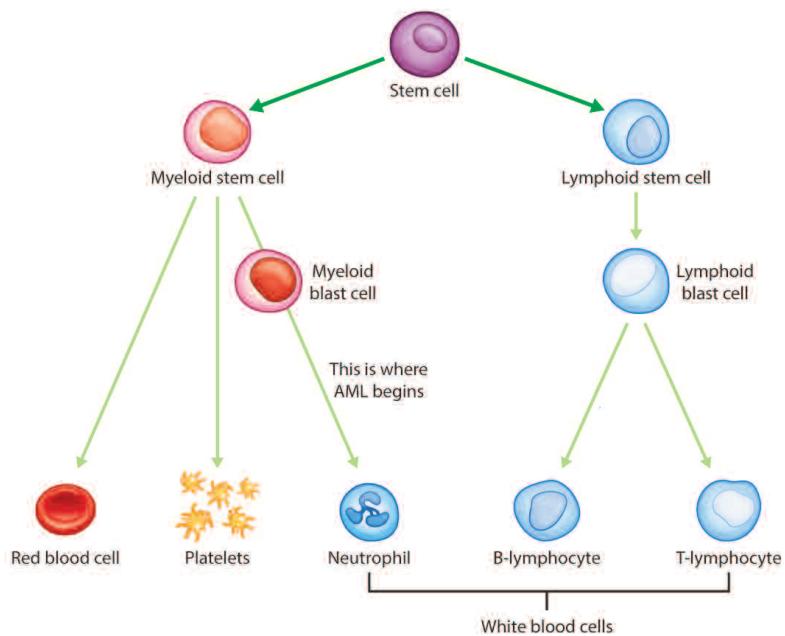
New blood cells are made in your bone marrow. This is the soft spongy tissue that fills the centre of some of your bones. All blood cells come from cells known as stem cells. Stem cells split and develop into myeloid stem cells or lymphoid stem cells. They start out as immature cells (blast cells) and then they develop into different types of mature blood cells.



Lymphoid stem cells develop into lymphocytes (white blood cells that fight infection)

Myeloid stem cells go on to form red blood cells, platelets and other types of white cells.

As blood cells develop, they move out of the bone marrow and into your bloodstream, where they do different jobs, such as fighting infection (white cells), carrying oxygen (red cells) and clotting your blood so you don't lose too much blood (platelets). Your body is constantly producing enough cells to keep this process going.



Blood cancers happen when something goes wrong with the development of blood cells in your bone marrow. With leukaemia, blast cells are produced but they don't develop properly. Instead, the immature blast cells build up in your bone marrow and the number of healthy cells is reduced. You get sick because there aren't enough healthy blood cells to do their jobs in the body.

Types of leukaemia

There are four main types of leukaemia:

- Acute myeloid leukaemia (AML)
- Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL)
- Chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML)
- Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL)

Their names come from the type of cell affected by the leukaemia (myeloid blast cells or lymphoid blast cells) and from how quickly they develop (chronic or acute).

What do 'acute' and 'chronic' mean?

Acute and chronic refer to how quickly leukaemia develops.

Acute: The leukaemia develops very quickly, over days and weeks.

Chronic: The disease develops slowly, usually over months or years.

Each type of leukaemia has its own features and treatment.

This booklet is about acute myeloid leukaemia (AML). For free booklets on the other types of leukaemia, contact our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

What is acute myeloid leukaemia (AML)?

AML is an acute (fast-growing) blood cancer, which affects the myeloid cells. With AML, mutations in the genetic material in myeloid cells stop the immature myeloid cells (blast cells) from developing into healthy, mature blood cells. This results in a rapid build-up of blast cells in the bone marrow and a shortage of mature blood cells.

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

What are the types of AML?

The information from your tests (see page 21) will help to determine the exact type of AML you have. There is a classification system used by doctors which was created by the World Health Organization (WHO). This divides AML into different groups based on which cells have become abnormal and if the person has had previous chemotherapy or a blood disorder.

You're not likely to hear your doctor talk about this system, but it can help your doctor to decide the best treatment for you, as some treatments are only used for certain types of AML.



AML risk groups

Your doctors may say that your leukaemia is 'low risk', 'intermediate risk' or 'high risk', based on the information they get from the tests you will have (see page 21). This is called risk grouping (or risk stratification). Your risk may change during your treatment.

Low risk: Your leukaemia is likely to be cured and there's less chance of the cancer coming back (relapse). Low-risk patients won't usually need a stem cell transplant, unless they relapse.

Intermediate risk: It is hard to predict how you will respond to treatment. You may or may not need a stem cell transplant.

High risk: There's a high risk of the leukaemia coming back (relapse) so you will have very intensive treatment. You are likely to have a stem cell transplant if you are suitable for one.

Acute promyelocytic leukaemia (APL)

Acute promyelocytic leukaemia (APL) is a sub-type of AML. APL is treated differently to other forms of AML, as it responds well to certain non-chemotherapy drugs, for example, all-trans retinoic acid (ATRA). APL is usually treated with a combination of drugs, which may include chemotherapy drugs. To find out more about APL, talk to a cancer nurse on our Support Line 1800 200 700 or visit your local Daffodil Centre.

What are the symptoms of AML?

Many of the symptoms of AML are caused by the change to normal blood cell production. You may not have all or any of the symptoms listed below. Symptoms of AML include:

- High temperatures or fevers, repeated infections – caused by fewer white blood cells
- Tiredness (fatigue), shortness of breath and weakness – caused by fewer red blood cells (anaemia)
- Blood in your urine, gums or stools (poo), unexplained bruising, tiny red spots on your skin, swollen gums – caused by fewer platelets
- Serious bleeding

- Aching bones and joints – caused by too many abnormal cells in your bone marrow
- Enlarged glands, for example in one or both armpits, groin or neck
- Enlarged spleen or liver – you may have a poor appetite, pain in your abdomen (tummy) or abdominal swelling
- Sepsis - this is a reaction to an infection. You may feel generally unwell, have a high or low temperature, or feel shivery
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss



Symptoms of AML can be vague and include lethargy, lack of energy and general inability to do the things you normally do. If you have symptoms that are troubling you, or new symptoms appear, tell your doctor.

How common is AML?

AML is a rare disease. About 120 people are diagnosed with it in Ireland each year. It is more common in people aged over 65.

What caused my cancer?



We don't know exactly what causes many cancers, but there are things that can increase your risk of getting cancer. If you want to know more about why cancer happens or to learn about risk factors for leukaemia, see our website www.cancer.ie or talk to a cancer nurse – call our Support Line or visit a Daffodil Centre. Most people who get leukaemia have no obvious risk factors. Having a risk factor doesn't mean you will get leukaemia.





Diagnosis and tests

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Being diagnosed with AML

Hearing the words 'leukaemia' and 'cancer' can be a huge shock.

You may be feeling:

- **Upset and overwhelmed** by your emotions
- **Confused** by all the information being given to you
- **Worried** about what will happen next
- **Angry** that this is happening to you

However you feel, you are not alone.

If you need to talk to someone, or if you want support or advice:

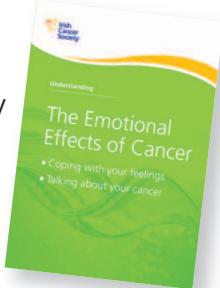
- Ask to speak to the cancer (oncology) liaison nurse or the medical social worker at the hospital. They can help you and your family to cope with your feelings and advise you about practical matters.
- Talk to one of our cancer nurses in confidence – visit a Daffodil Centre or call our Support Line on 1800 200 700. You can email the nurses at supportline@irishcancer.ie
- Speak to an Irish Cancer Society Survivor Support volunteer who has had a similar diagnosis and really knows what you are going through. Our cancer nurses can put you in touch with a volunteer.
- Talk to other people affected by cancer. Join our online community at www.cancer.ie/community
- Go to your local cancer support centre. For more information, see page 116.

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

Telling people about your diagnosis

Telling people about your diagnosis can help you to get support from friends and family. But you may feel you don't want to tell people straight away. You may be unsure how to break the news. You may also worry about how other people will react. For example, they may fuss over you or be upset.

If you would like to talk things over with a cancer nurse, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can ask them for a copy of our booklet *Understanding the Emotional Effects of Cancer*. It can help you find ways to talk about your cancer and to ask for the help and support you need.



The nurses can also support you if you have children and aren't sure what to say to them. You could ask for the booklet *Talking to Children about Cancer*, which has practical advice about how to talk to children of different ages.

These booklets are also available on our website www.cancer.ie.

What tests will I have?



- Tests you may have include blood tests, scans and bone marrow tests.
- The tests will tell your medical team more about your cancer and help them to decide on the best treatment for you.

The following tests give doctors more information about your cancer. Some tests may also be used to see how well you are responding to treatment.

Blood tests

A full blood count (FBC) will be taken. This finds out the levels of the different types of blood cells in your blood. Your blood will also be examined under a microscope, as leukaemia cells can sometimes be seen and the diagnosis confirmed. This is done by the haematologist.

Blood tests can also check how well your liver and kidneys are working. Your blood will also be screened for any infections, such as hepatitis and HIV, to make sure your treatment is safe for you.

Normal blood cell counts

Blood cell type	Normal levels
Haemoglobin	13-18g/dl (men) 11.5-16.5 g/dl (women)
White blood cells (WBC)	4.0-11.0 x 10 ⁹ /l
Neutrophils	2.0-7.5 x 10 ⁹ /l
Lymphocytes	1.5-4.5 x 10 ⁹ /l
Basophils	up to 0.01 x 10 ⁹ /l (0-1% of WBC)
Platelets	150-400 x 10 ⁹ /l

Central venous access devices

You will have regular blood tests, so it's likely you will have a device inserted to make it easier for your doctors to take blood and give medications. For example, a central line or Hickman line. See page 51 for more information.

Blood film

Your doctor may look at a blood sample under a microscope in order to determine the amount of leukaemia cells present. This is often called a blood film and is usually carried out in the haematology laboratory of the hospital.

Bone marrow tests

Bone marrow tests involve taking a tiny sample (biopsy) of your bone marrow and looking at it under a microscope. The sample is usually taken from your hip bone. If the sample of bone marrow cells is semi-liquid, it is called an aspirate. If a piece of solid bone marrow is taken, it is called a trephine biopsy. Both can be done at the same time. Care has to be taken if you are on warfarin, aspirin or any other drugs that thin your blood. Your doctor will advise you about this.

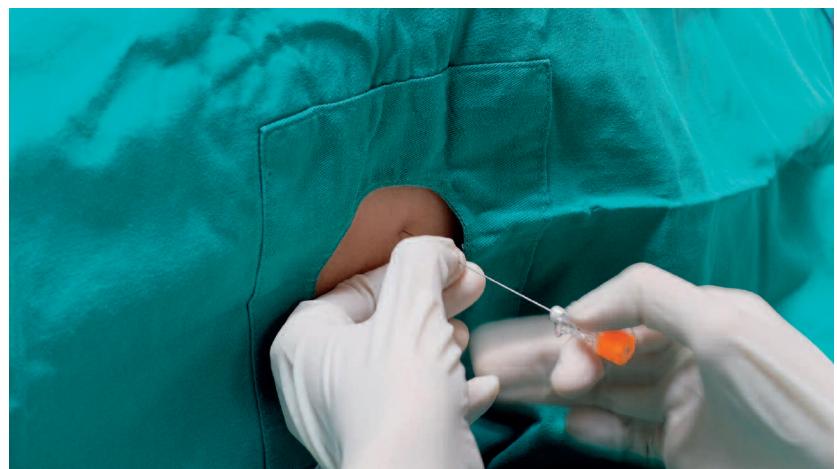
Your doctor will give you a local anaesthetic to numb the area beforehand. The biopsy itself may be uncomfortable and can last up to 10 minutes. The entire test can take about 30 minutes. Once the needle is put into your bone cavity, a sample of your bone marrow is drawn into a syringe. Bone marrow is red in colour and looks very like blood. A different kind of needle is used to do the trephine biopsy.

When it is over, a small plaster is put on the area where the bone marrow has been taken. You may be asked to lie on your back for 10-15 minutes to stop any possible bleeding. You can take mild painkillers, like paracetamol, if you feel any discomfort later.

If you are having this test done as an outpatient – which is sometimes done between treatments – you will need someone to drive you home.

Lumbar puncture

This test involves passing a needle into the lower part of your back to take a sample of the fluid that surrounds your brain and spinal cord (CSF). The fluid will be checked for leukaemia cells. Not everyone needs this test. Your doctor will tell you if you need it. If you have this test done as an outpatient, you will need someone to drive you home.



Specific tests on bone marrow

Chromosomes studies (cytogenetics)

Chromosomes are made up of genes that control the activities of cells. Leukaemia is caused by mistakes in the genes. Chromosome tests can find out the number and shape of the chromosomes in your blood cells. Tests can be done on your blood and/or bone marrow samples. These chromosomes are then compared to normal cells.

With AML, there may be some particular genetic changes in the leukaemia cells. Knowing about these changes will help your doctor to decide on the best treatment for you. It is important to note that these gene changes / faults are not the same as genes passed through families. The changes are only in the leukaemia cells.

Fluorescence in situ hybridisation (Fish) analysis

A test called Fish analysis makes abnormal genes glow (fluoresce) so that the doctor can identify the particular type of genetic abnormality. A Fish test can help your doctor to predict how your leukaemia might respond to a particular treatment, so they can recommend the best option for you.

Immunophenotyping

Immunophenotyping is a test that checks what kind of proteins or markers are on the surface of the leukaemia cells.

Immunophenotyping can be used to diagnose what type of AML you have. The result can affect the type of treatment you have.

Flow cytometry

Flow cytometry measures the number and percentage of cells in a blood sample and cell characteristics such as size, shape and the presence of biomarkers on the cell surface. Cells, usually from the bone marrow or blood, are passed through a machine called a flow cytometer. This method can be used for immunophenotyping or to check how you are responding to treatment.

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

Other tests

Depending on how well you are when you are diagnosed, your doctors may want to do additional tests. These tests aren't always routine and some aren't necessarily done before you start your treatment, so don't worry if you don't have them.

Ultrasound

Ultrasound uses sound waves to produce pictures of the inside of your body. It only takes a few minutes and does not hurt. Some gel is first put on your skin and a device called a probe is passed over it. Ultrasound can be used to look at lymph nodes near the surface of the body. It can also be used to look inside your abdomen for enlarged lymph nodes or enlarged organs such as the liver, spleen, and kidneys.

You may also have an echocardiogram (echo), which is an ultrasound of your heart. This can check your heart health and help your doctor to decide if intensive treatment may be suitable for you.



Blood-clotting tests

Some types of AML, like acute promyelocytic leukaemia (see page 13), can cause blood-clotting problems. Your doctor may decide to do a test to check how well your blood clots.

Chest X-ray

A chest X-ray uses high-energy rays to take pictures of the inside of your body. It can find out if you have a chest infection and the state of your general health.

CT scan (CAT scan)

This is a special type of X-ray that gives a detailed 3D picture of the tissues inside your body. You might be asked to fast (not eat) for a few hours before the test. You may also be given an injection or a special drink to help show up parts of your body on the scan. The injection may make you feel hot all over for a few minutes. During the scan you will lie on a table which passes through a large doughnut-shaped machine. The scan is painless and takes between 10 and 30 minutes. You'll probably be able to go home as soon as the scan is over.



MRI scan

This is a scan that uses magnetic energy to build up a picture of the tissues inside your body. During the test you will lie inside a tunnel-like machine. Some people are afraid they will feel claustrophobic inside the tunnel. Tell the radiation therapist if you're feeling anxious. During the scan you cannot wear metal jewellery. If you have any medical device in your body, like a pacemaker or pin, you may not be suitable for the test.

An MRI can also be noisy, but you will be given earplugs / headphones to wear. You might get an injection before the scan to show up certain parts of your body. Usually you can go home soon after the scan. You shouldn't need to stay in hospital.

For most scans you will be alone in the treatment room, but the medical staff can still see you and hear you. If you need anything, just speak or raise your hand.

Waiting for test results



It usually takes 1-2 weeks for all the test results to come back. Naturally, this can be an anxious time for you. It may help to talk things over with the specialist nurse or with a relative or close friend. You can also call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre to speak to a cancer nurse.

Asking about your prognosis



Your prognosis includes information about how your cancer is likely to progress, including average survival times or life expectancy.

It's not always easy for doctors to answer a question about life expectancy. Everyone is different, so what happens to you might be quite different from what the doctor expects.

Should I ask about my prognosis?

If your prognosis is better than expected, you may feel more hopeful about your illness and your future. You may feel more in control by having as much information as possible. Or you may not want to know about your prognosis. You may prefer not to think about the future too much or you may worry how you will cope if you get bad news.

If you decide you want information on your prognosis:

- **Think carefully about how you will cope with the information.**
- **Make sure you are asking about your prognosis to meet your own information needs and not that of others.**
- **Get information on prognosis from your doctor.** They know your individual circumstances. Your doctor can also support you in understanding the information and answer any questions you have.
- **Ask a friend or family member to go with you**, if you would like some support. Make a list of the questions you would like to ask the doctor or nurse, as it is easy to forget what you want to say. Decide beforehand if you or your support person will ask the questions.
- **Be careful with online information.** It may be hard to understand or even incorrect. Also, the information may not really apply to your situation or to your particular cancer type. Ask your doctor or nurse specialist for recommended websites.
- **Accept that you will need some time to think about what you have been told.** You may forget some things or there may be things you didn't understand. You may need to talk to your doctor or nurse again after you have thought about everything.
- **Get emotional support if you need it.** If you feel upset or anxious about your prognosis you can get support from friends, family or your hospital team. You can also call our Support Line on 1800 200 700, visit a Daffodil Centre or email supportline@irishcancer.ie. Our cancer nurses can give you support, information and advice. They can also tell you about free counselling and other services that can help you.

Treatment overview

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How is AML treated?



- Most patients with AML will have chemotherapy treatment.
- Some patients may be suitable for a stem cell transplant.
- A team of healthcare professionals will be looking after you (multidisciplinary team).

Because AML is a fast-growing cancer, treatment will start soon after you have been diagnosed. The aim of treatment is to reduce/eliminate the leukaemia cells from your blood and bone marrow to allow normal healthy cells to grow. The best treatment for you will depend on:

- Whether your doctor thinks there is a high risk your AML will return (relapse) following standard treatment
- Your age and general health

You will normally stay in hospital for part of your treatment. Talk to your doctor about how long you will be expected to stay, as this can influence your decision on treatment. See page 45 for more about treating AML.



Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is the main treatment for AML. It is given to destroy all the leukaemia cells and to make space in your bone marrow for healthy cells to grow again. After chemotherapy, most patients with AML go into remission. This means there are no signs of AML in your blood and bone marrow (see page 47). Usually chemotherapy greatly decreases the risk of AML coming back. See page 47 for more information on chemotherapy.

Steroid therapy

Steroids are often used with chemotherapy, or you may be given steroids while waiting for chemotherapy to start. See page 62 for more on steroids.

Targeted therapy

These are drugs that target certain parts of cancer cells that make them different from other cells. Some targeted therapy drugs are only effective in treating certain types of AML. Your doctor or nurse will explain if they are suitable for you. See page 64 for more on targeted therapy.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy helps your immune system to work better to fight cancer cells. Different types of immunotherapy treatments work in different ways. You might have immunotherapy on its own or with other cancer treatments. See page 65 for more details.

Stem cell transplant

A stem cell transplant may be offered as treatment for your cancer. The transplant will help to create healthy bone marrow that will in turn make healthy stem cells and normal blood cells. If your healthcare team thinks a transplant may be helpful to you, they will start to look for a suitable donor while you are having your chemotherapy treatment. See page 66 for more about transplants.

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy is rarely used with AML. But it can be used to treat leukaemia cells that have spread to your brain and spinal cord. Radiotherapy can also prepare your bone marrow before a transplant. This is called total body irradiation (TBI). For more information, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. Ask for a free copy of the booklet, *Understanding Radiotherapy*, or download it from www.cancer.ie



Supportive care

Supportive care means extra treatment is given to help with the symptoms of your illness or the side-effects of treatment. For example, a blood transfusion to help with anaemia. If your illness is at an advanced stage, treatment may only be able to control it rather than cure it. Supportive care can ease symptoms and give you a better quality of life. See page 68 for more details.

Specialist cancer centres

AML is a rare disease and is treated in specialist cancer centres in Ireland. The staff at these centres are experienced in managing patients with AML. As a result, you may be transferred to another hospital from the one where you received your diagnosis, depending on your diagnosis and your suggested treatment plan.

Preparing for your hospital appointment

Preparation is key to getting the most out of your hospital appointment. Being prepared also helps the doctors and nurses get all the information they need – and plan the next steps in your care accordingly.

Before your appointment

- Write down a list of questions and things you would like to discuss.
- Know where you are going and plan your journey (build in extra time for unexpected delays).
- Dress in comfortable clothes and shoes – sometimes you can be waiting around for a while. Layers are best, as the temperatures in hospitals can vary a lot. Remember too, loose-fitting clothing will be easier to manage if you are having your blood pressure taken, blood tests or a physical examination.
- Try to drink some clear fluids (water or juice without pulp) if you are having a blood test as it makes it easier for the nurse or doctor to find a vein.
- Check with the hospital if it is okay to bring someone with you. Ask a friend or family member to go along for extra support.

What to take to your appointment

Put together a list of things you might need to bring for your visit, including:

- Your medical card, if you have one.
- Your private health insurance details, if you have it.
- The appointment letter from the hospital, if you got one.
- A referral letter or GP letter, if you got one.

- Your medical history – remember, your doctor will likely ask you lots of questions so it's a good idea to have everything written down beforehand.
- Your GP's name and contact details.
- Your list of questions.
- A notebook and pen to take notes. (Some healthcare professionals/nurses may be happy for you to record the meeting, but make sure you ask for their permission before doing so.)
- A list of your medications or the medication itself – ask your pharmacist to print off a list of your medication. Hand-written lists can be inaccurate.
- The date when your prescription is due, so you can ask for a prescription before you leave, if needed.
- Medications you may need that day, in case you are delayed.
- A light snack and drink if you are likely to have to wait for some time.
- Your phone.
- Your glasses and hearing aid, if you use them.
- A book or something to listen to (including headphones) to pass the time while you wait.

Before leaving the appointment

- Make sure you feel satisfied that your questions were answered and that you have written down what you need to know.
- Make sure you know what will happen next.
- Ask for the name and number of someone you can contact in case you have further questions.
- Ensure you are booked in for your follow-up appointment before you leave.

After the appointment

Arrange any tests in advance of your next appointment as soon as you can, for example, a blood test – if your healthcare professional has asked for it.

Note: If you have to cancel your appointment...

If you are unable to attend your appointment, contact the hospital in advance and they will try to arrange a new appointment for you. If you don't go to your appointment or contact the hospital, you may have to return to your GP and go back on the waiting list for a new appointment.

Accepting treatment

You have the right to find out what a treatment option means for you, and the right to accept or refuse it. If you want to refuse a particular treatment, let your doctor or nurse know your concerns first. It may help to talk to your GP as well. The important thing is that you are fully aware of the benefits and risks.

Time to think

AML is a fast-growing cancer, so treatment will start as soon as possible after diagnosis. This can be hard when you are coming to terms with your diagnosis. You may feel everything is happening too quickly. You may feel under pressure to make a decision. Talk to your consultant or specialist nurse if you're feeling overwhelmed or if you have any questions or worries.

Deciding on treatment

Multidisciplinary team

A multidisciplinary team (MDT) is a team of specialists involved in caring for your type of cancer. For example, a haematologist and specialist nurse. The team will meet to discuss your test results and your suggested treatment plan.

Understanding your treatment

Your doctor and nurse will explain your treatment options. Ask as many questions as you like. You could write down any questions you have in advance, so you don't forget anything. If you do forget something or need more explanations, ask your specialist nurse or talk to one of our cancer nurses – call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

Second opinion

You might also find it reassuring to have another medical opinion to help you decide about your treatment. Your treating doctor or GP can refer you to another specialist for a second opinion if you feel this would be helpful.

Giving consent for treatment

Before you start any treatment, you should be asked to sign a consent form saying that you understand what the treatment is for and that you give permission for treatment to be given. Before treatment, you should have been given full information about:

- What the treatment is for
- The type and amount of treatment you will have
- The benefits and risks of the treatment
- Possible side-effects from treatment
- Any other treatments that may be available

If you are confused about the information given to you, let your doctor or nurse know straight away. They can explain it to you again. Some treatments can be hard to understand and may need to be explained more than once. You can still change your mind after you have started treatment. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any worries about your treatment plan.

Individual treatment

You may notice that other people with AML are not getting the same treatment as you. Their AML may not be the same type or at the same phase as yours. Treatment decisions can also depend on any previous treatments you have had and your general health. Everyone's treatment needs will be different. Ask your doctor about your treatment if you have any questions.

Who will be involved in my care?

Usually a team of health professionals will be involved in your treatment and care.



Haematologist: A doctor who specialises in disorders of the blood and lymphatic system.

Medical oncologist/haematologist: A doctor who specialises in treating cancer patients using chemotherapy and other drugs.

Radiation oncologist: A doctor who specialises in treating cancer patients using radiotherapy.

Radiation therapist: A person who delivers the radiotherapy and gives advice to cancer patients about their radiation treatment.

Pathologist: A doctor who examines any tissue samples taken and helps to reach a diagnosis.

Advanced nurse practitioner (ANP): ANPs give expert information and support and are specially trained to carry out tests and help to review your treatment.

Oncology or haematology liaison nurse / clinical nurse specialist:

A specially trained nurse who works in a cancer care unit. They give information and reassurance to you and your family from diagnosis and throughout treatment.

Medical social worker: A person trained to help you and your family with any social issues or practical needs. They can give counselling and emotional support. They can give advice on social welfare benefits and financial matters and on practical supports and services, available to you from the time of your diagnosis, right through to returning to work.

Dietitian: An expert on food and nutrition. They are trained to give advice on diet during your illness and use diet to help symptoms.

Staff nurses: Nurses who are specially trained to give your treatment.

GP (family doctor): You can talk to your GP about your medication and any side-effects you have. You can also contact your GP about any worries you have or if you are finding it hard to cope.

Physiotherapist A therapist who treats injury or illness with exercises and other physical treatments.

Occupational therapist (OT) A therapist who specialises in helping people who are ill or disabled learn to manage their daily activities. They are mainly concerned with physical disability and cognitive function.

Healthcare assistants Healthcare workers who provide assistance, support and direct personal care to patients.

Pharmacists: Pharmacists – in hospital and in your local pharmacy – dispense chemotherapy and other cancer drugs. They can give advice on cancer drugs, such as how to take them, side-effects, and possible interactions between your cancer drugs and other medicines, food and drink, and supplements such as herbs and vitamins.

Psycho-oncology team: These are specialists in psychological care and support for cancer patients. Usually the team includes psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and nurses.

Psychologist: A specialist who can talk to you and your family about emotional and personal matters and can help you to make decisions.

Counsellor: A person trained to give you emotional support and advice when you find it difficult to come to terms with your illness.

Community health services: This includes family doctors, public health nurses (who can visit you at home), welfare officers and home help organisers. Your local health centre or the medical social worker in the hospital can advise you about these services.

Waiting for treatment to start

Treatment for AML usually starts as soon as possible after diagnosis.

If you are waiting, even for a short time, while your treatment is being planned, you might like to focus on eating well, quitting smoking, avoiding alcohol and being active – see ‘How can I help myself?’ on page 41.

Find out about any support services that are available within the hospital. A listening ear can help reduce stress and provide support while you are receiving treatment in hospital. You can also call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre to speak to a cancer nurse.

How can I help myself?

It can be very difficult to cope with a cancer diagnosis and all the changes that this can bring. Your healthcare team can offer you different types of support, but there are also things you can do yourself before and when you start treatment.

Eat well

Eating well when you have cancer can help you to keep up your strength and muscle mass. It can help you to:

- Feel stronger and maintain a healthy weight
- Cope better with the side-effects of treatment
- Reduce the risk of infection
- Recover



Ask to talk to the dietitian at the hospital for advice on the best diet for you. You can also read our booklet *Diet and Cancer*. To get a copy, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700, visit a Daffodil Centre or download it on our website www.cancer.ie

Keep active

Keeping active has many benefits. It can help to:

- Reduce tiredness and some treatment side-effects
- Reduce anxiety and depression
- Improve your mood and quality of life
- Strengthen your muscles, joints and bones
- Reduce the risk of other health issues



Talk to your doctor or nurse before starting or increasing the amount of exercise you take. They can advise you on the type and amount of exercise that is safe for you. Be careful not to overdo it at the beginning, but build up gradually. You could ask for a referral to a physiotherapist, to help you plan appropriate exercises while in hospital.

Quit smoking

If you are coping with a cancer diagnosis, you may find it stressful to quit smoking. However, research tells us that:

- Non-smokers have fewer or less severe side-effects during cancer treatment
- Smoking can reduce how well chemotherapy or radiotherapy work
- Not smoking reduces the risk of other illnesses



If you would like advice or support on quitting, call the HSE Quit Team on CallSave 1800 201 203 or Freetext QUIT to 50100. Some hospitals have smoking cessation officers who can help and support you.

Other ways to help yourself

Get information about your cancer and treatment

Understanding cancer and its treatment and knowing what to expect can help to relieve anxiety and stress for some people. If it makes you anxious, you could ask a friend to do the research for you, and tell you anything important.

Involve your family and close friends

Don't keep any worries or physical problems secret from the people closest to you. Ask someone close to you to come with you when you are visiting the doctor and when treatments will be discussed. Your friends and family will be affected by your diagnosis too, so try to talk openly and find ways to support each other.

Use your support network

Don't be shy about asking for help. Family and friends may not know the best way to help you, so tell them what you need. For example, lifts to the hospital, practical help at home, child-minding or just some company or support. Telling people what you need and how they can help means you will get the right amount of support to suit you.

Try relaxation and stress management techniques

Therapies like meditation or yoga can help you to cope with stress. Some cancer support centres provide groups to help you learn these techniques.

Accept change in your life

Accept that you may not be able to carry on exactly as before. Give yourself time to adjust to your new routine. Know that there will be ups and downs. Sometimes people feel they have to be brave or positive all the time, but it's normal to have bad days. Get help if you are finding it hard to cope.

Try to cope day by day

Don't think about the future too much. Concentrate on the present and getting through each day of tests or treatment. That way, you may find it easier to cope with your illness.



Types of treatment

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Chemotherapy



- Chemotherapy uses drugs to kill cancer cells.
- Chemotherapy can cause a range of side-effects.
- Side-effects usually go after treatment ends.

Chemotherapy is the main treatment for AML. This drug treatment is given to destroy all the leukaemia cells and make space in your bone marrow for healthy cells to grow again. Usually, chemotherapy reduces the risk of the cancer coming back. After chemotherapy, most patients go into remission.

What is remission?



Remission is when your bone marrow is producing blood cells normally and you have fewer than 5% of the immature leukaemia cells in your bone marrow. Your red blood cell, white blood cell and platelet counts have returned to normal or close to normal levels and there are no signs or symptoms of the disease.

Sometimes after receiving chemotherapy the leukaemia cells are still present in your bone marrow. This is called refractory disease, but it can still be treated.

There is a chance that your illness will come back (relapse). If this happens, you may have more chemotherapy, other types of drugs or a stem cell transplant.

Intensive or non-intensive treatment?

The most important decision about your chemotherapy treatment is whether you have intensive treatment or non-intensive treatment.

Intensive treatment

Intensive treatment involves strong chemotherapy with the aim of cure. Although each patient is treated on an individual basis, intensive chemotherapy treatment is usually appropriate if you're under 70 years old and have good medical fitness. Some older patients in good health may benefit from similar or slightly less intensive treatments as older patients are more likely to have other medical problems – including diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels or heart disease.

What are the stages of intensive chemotherapy treatment for AML?

For AML, chemotherapy is given in 2 stages:

1 Induction: The first step in your leukaemia treatment is an intense dosing of chemotherapy, which aims to get rid of all the leukaemia from your blood and bone marrow and quickly get your bone marrow working normally again (remission). This stage is called induction chemotherapy or remission induction. Induction usually involves two cycles of a combination of chemotherapy drugs. When the induction is over, a bone marrow test will be done to check if the leukaemia has gone into remission.

2 Consolidation: When you have finished induction and you are in remission, you will start consolidation therapy. The aim of this phase is to reduce the risk of relapse. You will usually need 2-3 more cycles to complete the consolidation phase of treatment, but this can vary depending on the type of AML you have and the progress of the disease. Without these cycles, there is a higher risk of the leukaemia coming back in the first year. You might also have a stem cell transplant (see page 66). If you have a transplant, you might not have any further chemotherapy, or you might just have one more course.

How long does intensive chemotherapy treatment last?

Intensive chemotherapy usually involves 3 or 4 courses or cycles of treatment over a 4-6 month period. Each course lasts a number of days and it usually takes your blood count 3-4 weeks to recover. Your doctor or nurse will tell you about the schedule most suitable for you. You'll have most of your treatment as an inpatient in hospital, but nearly all patients will get to go home for a week or so between courses.

For AML there are 2 stages of chemotherapy treatment: induction and consolidation. Chemotherapy treatment usually starts as soon as possible.



Non-intensive treatment

Non-intensive treatment involves low doses of chemotherapy or other drug treatments, for example, targeted therapies (see page 64). Non-intensive treatment can be less effective in guaranteeing long-term remission but it is easier on your body. This may be a better option if you are over 70 or have other medical problems.

There are lots of different options for non-intensive treatment. Your treatment, and the way it is given, will be tailored to your individual disease type and needs. Azacitidine (Vidaza®) is an example of a drug used for non-intensive treatment.

Where do I go for chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is usually given in hospital. More than likely you will have to travel to a cancer centre for treatment. When you start treatment, you may need to spend a number of weeks in hospital. If you are well enough and the doctors are satisfied with your blood results, you will be allowed home before the next cycle begins.

How often will I have chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy is often given in cycles with a rest period between treatments. This rest period allows your body time to recover from the side-effects of treatment. The number of cycles can vary, depending on your cancer type and how well it is responding to treatment.

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

How is chemotherapy given?

Before chemotherapy starts, you will be given medication such as allopurinol or rasburicase to help your kidneys get rid of uric acid. Uric acid can build up in your kidneys when a lot of leukaemia cells are killed during chemotherapy. Without this medication, uric acid may cause gout or kidney stones, and can interfere with the flow of urine.

Drink plenty of fluid
to protect your kidneys.

During the treatment cycles, many different chemotherapy drugs are used. There are a few ways to give these drugs. For example:

- By injection into a vein or by a drip infusion (intravenous)
- By injection into the fluid around your spinal cord (intrathecal)
- By mouth (oral), in the form of capsules or tablets

Most chemotherapy for AML is given into a vein (intravenously). Once in your bloodstream, the chemotherapy drugs can travel around your body. There are different ways to give the drugs directly into the vein. A cannula is a fine tube put into a vein in your arm or on the back of your hand. This is used as a short-term solution and will likely be removed in less than a week.

Central venous access devices

Chemotherapy will be given over a long period of time, so you will probably have a central venous access device fitted – a thin tube (line) which goes directly into a vein. This makes it easier and less painful to give chemotherapy and other drugs, antibiotics, and blood and platelet transfusions directly into your bloodstream. Blood samples can also be taken from the line too. This avoids you having repeated blood tests using a vein in your arm.

Central line

This is a thin flexible tube tunneled through the skin in your chest and put into a large vein near your heart. It is usually used for a week or so, but it may be left in place for weeks if it does not become infected or blocked.

Hickman line

This is a thin flexible tube put into a vein in your neck and tunneled through your chest. It exits above the breast and can have 3 or 4 different lines for accessing your bloodstream. It can be left in place for weeks, as long as it doesn't become infected or blocked.

PICC line (peripherally inserted central catheter)

This is a thin flexible tube put into a vein in your arm and tunneled through your upper arm and chest until the tube lies in a vein near your heart. It may have 1, 2, or 3 lines for accessing your bloodstream. This is more long term and can stay in for weeks or months without complications.

Most chemotherapy is given into a vein.



Caring for central venous access devices



It is important to take good care of your device. You may experience some problems, such as:

Blockage

A blockage can be due to blood clotting where the tube enters your vein, like in a wound. The line will be maintained carefully to try to prevent it getting blocked.

Infection

An infection can cause fever, redness, pain or discharge around the tube, or swelling of one arm. **Let the hospital know immediately – even out of hours – if you have these symptoms, as you may need antibiotics.**

Tube falling out

In general it is hard for a line to fall out, as your skin will grow around it. If the line does come out, don't panic. Cover the area with a clean dressing and contact the hospital straight away. Before you go home, your nurse will show you how to care for your line and help prevent these complications. You will be told who to contact if you have problems during the day or at night. Keep all the parts of the line, if it falls out, and bring them to the hospital, as it may be repaired.

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

Intrathecal chemotherapy – injection into the spinal fluid

Chemotherapy is sometimes given into the fluid around your brain and spinal cord – which is called the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). This can be done to treat cancer that has spread to this area or to prevent cancer spreading to this area. This is called intrathecal chemotherapy.

For this treatment, you lie on your side and hold onto your knees. Before placing a small needle into the spine in your lower back (lumbar puncture), your doctor will give you an injection to numb the area.

A small amount of spinal fluid will then be drawn off and the drug injected into your spine. This allows the drug to travel to your brain. When chemotherapy is given into the spinal fluid, you may get some headaches and dizziness or blurred vision. You must lie flat for 1–4 hours after the lumbar puncture to prevent these symptoms. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any symptoms. If you have this treatment as an outpatient, you will need someone to drive you home.

By mouth

Many cancer drugs can be taken in tablet form. These include steroids, antibiotics and chemotherapy. It can help if you eat or drink something before taking certain tablets. Your doctor or nurse will advise you about this. If you would like more details on how chemotherapy is given, contact our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. Ask for a free copy of the booklet *Understanding chemotherapy and other cancer drugs* or download it from www.cancer.ie

Injection into muscle

Some chemotherapy drugs may be given by injection directly into your muscle.

What drugs are used?

Your doctor will decide which drugs are best for you, based on the type of AML you have, your age and your general health. Chemotherapy drugs can be given alone or in combination. Examples of chemotherapy drugs used to treat AML are cytarabine, daunorubicin, and cyclophosphamide.

Understanding your drug treatment

It's important that you understand the drugs you have been given. Ask your doctor or specialist nurse for more information about your drug treatment and any possible side-effects. They should give you a printed sheet to take home with you.

If you know the name of your chemotherapy drug, visit the Health Product Regulatory Authority's website at www.hpra.ie for more information about the drug and possible side-effects.

If you have any questions or need any more information, you can speak to our cancer nurses by calling our Support Line on 1800 200 700.



Will I get side-effects?

Side-effects happen because chemotherapy can affect both healthy cells and cancer cells. Side-effects often happen 10–14 days after chemotherapy.

It is likely you will have some side-effects. These can include anaemia and an increased risk of infection. These may happen if the chemotherapy reduces the number of red blood cells, white blood cells or platelets. Your blood count will be checked regularly to help watch your condition.

After each treatment, your blood count will return to normal. But sometimes this may take longer than expected. As a result, your next cycle of treatment may be delayed to allow your bone marrow to recover. The side-effects vary from person to person and depend on the type of drugs used and the amount of chemotherapy given. Most side-effects can be helped by medication, so tell your doctor or nurse if you are having any problems. Usually the side-effects go away when the treatment ends, or soon after.

What are the side-effects of chemotherapy?

Anaemia

If the number of red blood cells in your blood is low (anaemia), you may become tired and weak. Because the amount of oxygen being carried around your body is less, you may also become breathless. You might also feel dizzy and light-headed and your muscles and joints can ache. Once the chemotherapy is over, the tiredness will ease off gradually. But you may still feel tired for a year or more afterwards. A blood transfusion can be given if your red blood cells are low. This will help you to feel more energetic and less breathless.

Take plenty of rests and breaks if you are feeling tired or fatigued.

Bleeding and bruising

Bruising is caused by a reduced number of platelet cells in your blood. This is called thrombocytopenia. Platelets help to make your blood clot and stop bleeding when you hurt yourself. You may suffer from nosebleeds or bleed more heavily than usual from minor cuts or grazes. Bleeding may develop under your skin, usually as blood spots on your legs, feet, trunk and arms. This is known as petechiae.



Bleeding gums is also a common sign of low platelets. In women, periods can be heavier and longer than usual during the first few cycles. Do let your nurse or doctor know at once if you have any bleeding or bruising, including any unusual vaginal bleeding. You may need a platelet transfusion to help reduce it. Also, use a soft toothbrush such as a child's toothbrush and an electric razor when shaving and wear rubber gloves when doing household or gardening jobs, to protect yourself from cuts.

Infection

AML can affect your white blood cells, which fight infections. Having a low level of white blood cells is called neutropenia and means that your body's immune system cannot fight infections properly. If you don't have enough white blood cells, even minor infections such as a cold or sore throat could make you ill.

If your temperature goes above 37.5°C (99.5°F) or below 35°C (95°F) at home, or if you suddenly feel shivery or unwell, contact your doctor or the hospital immediately.

You may need to be admitted to hospital to receive antibiotics into a vein. Check with your nurse about how to take your temperature and when you should contact them if you have a high temperature. Most haematology units have a direct phone number to call for advice if your temperature is high.

Some hospitals have slightly different temperature guidelines so check these with your haematology department.

Remember, contact your doctor or hospital without delay if you think you have an infection. Sepsis (blood poisoning) can develop as the body reacts to an infection. Severe sepsis can require intensive care treatment.

Hints & Tips – Avoiding infection

- Protect yourself against coronavirus by getting advice from your doctor or nurse and by following public health guidelines. Visit www.cancer.ie to find out more about coronavirus and cancer.
- Avoid crowds and close contact, such as hugging or kissing, with people who have colds or flu and other infections. This includes chickenpox, shingles or measles. Let your doctor know if you are in contact with these or any other infections.
- Wash your hands often during the day, and apply an alcohol hand gel, especially before you eat and after going to the toilet.
- Avoid unpasteurised milk, soft cheeses, undercooked meat and poultry, and the skin of raw vegetables and fresh fruit.
- If your temperature goes above 37.5°C (99.5°F) or below 35°C (95°F) or if you suddenly feel shivery or unwell, even if your temperature is normal, contact your doctor or the hospital immediately.
- Ask your doctor about getting vaccinations to protect you from infection before and after treatment.
- Ask your doctor about seeing a dentist before treatment starts.

Other possible side-effects

Fatigue

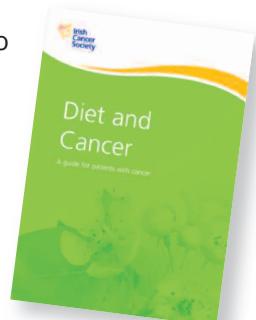
Fatigue is where you feel tired and weak and rest does not seem to help. For more information see page 73.

Nausea and vomiting

Chemotherapy can cause nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting (being sick). Thinking or talking about the treatment can also make you feel sick. This is called anticipatory nausea. There are medications that work well to prevent nausea and vomiting.

Loss of appetite

Some chemotherapy drugs can reduce your appetite for a while. Your sense of taste may also change during treatment, which can also affect your appetite. Food may taste more salty, bitter or metallic, or you may lose your sense of taste. Normal taste will come back once the treatment is over. Speak to the dietitian at the hospital or see our booklet *Diet and Cancer* for advice to help with these problems.



Mouth and throat problems

Chemotherapy can cause mouth and throat problems including a dry mouth, ulcers and gum infections. There are many mouthwashes and medications to help, which your doctor can prescribe for you.

Hair loss (alopecia)

Some chemotherapy drugs can cause hair loss from all over your body. How much hair falls out depends on the drug given, the dose and your own reaction to it. Hair will grow back after you stop chemo. You may like to consider getting a hair piece, which is sometimes covered by private health insurance or with a medical card – you can check this with the medical social worker in the hospital. Talk to your specialist nurse about hair piece services that are available.

Constipation and diarrhoea

Chemotherapy can cause constipation (not having a bowel movement often enough) and diarrhoea (frequent loose or watery bowel movements).

Drink up to 2 litres of fluid a day if you have diarrhoea or constipation.

Skin and nail changes

Skin may become dry, flaky and itchy. Nails may become dark, yellow or brittle.

Peripheral neuropathy

Some drugs can affect your nerve endings. This is known as peripheral neuropathy. Tell your chemotherapy nurse or doctor if you have numbness or a tingling or burning sensation in your hands and feet.

Changes in kidney or liver function

Some drugs can irritate or damage kidney cells. Talk to your doctor if you have decreased urination, swelling of the hands or feet (oedema) or headaches, as these can be a sign of kidney damage; yellowing of the skin or eyes (jaundice) can be a sign of liver problems. Blood tests will check your kidney and liver function before your chemo treatment.

Infertility and birth defects

Some of the drugs used may cause infertility (see page 77). It may be temporary or permanent. Chemotherapy can cause birth defects, so you should use contraception to avoid pregnancy until your doctor tells you it's safe to stop. See page 76 for more information.

Growth factors

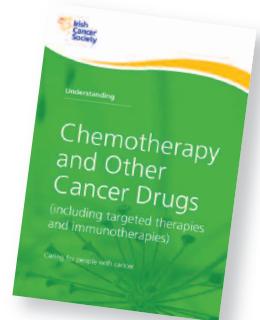
To reduce the risk of infection, growth factors may be used. These drugs encourage the growth of white blood cells. They are helpful if the number of white cells is low after chemotherapy. The two most commonly used ones are called G-CSF and GM-CSF, which are given as injections under the skin. You may need daily injections after chemotherapy until your white blood cells return to a normal level. You may get some side-effects from the injections like bone or joint pain. Let your doctor know if you feel unwell or have any side-effects.

Report any side-effects



If you have any symptoms that are troubling you or you feel unwell, tell your doctor or nurse straight away. You will be given details of who to contact before you start your treatment.

For more information on the side-effects of chemotherapy or a copy of the booklet Understanding *Chemotherapy and Other Cancer Drugs*, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can also look at our website, www.cancer.ie for tips on coping with different side-effects.



Steroid therapy



- Steroids can help some cancer drugs to work better.
- Steroids may be given while you are waiting for chemotherapy to start.
- There can be several side-effects with steroids.

Steroids are often used with chemotherapy, or you may be given steroids straight away while waiting for chemotherapy to start. Steroids are natural hormones made in your body. But they can kill leukaemia cells while having little effect on normal cells. Examples of the drugs are prednisolone and dexamethasone. Steroids may be given as part of your treatment for AML. They are usually given in tablet form, but can be given directly into your vein too.

What are the side-effects?

In high doses steroids can have several side-effects, though not everyone will get side-effects. The more common side-effects include:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| • Increased appetite and weight gain | • Fluid retention |
| • Increased blood pressure | • Higher risk of infection, especially thrush |
| • Osteoporosis | • Sleeplessness |
| • Stomach upset | • Mood changes – irritability, anxiety, tearfulness, high spirits |
| • Increased blood sugar – diabetes | |

Blood sugars: While receiving steroids, blood tests will be done regularly to check your blood sugar levels. Tell your doctor or nurse if you get very thirsty or if you are passing more urine than usual. Your blood sugars usually return to normal once treatment has stopped.

Mood and emotional changes: Occasionally steroids may cause you to have episodes of extreme happiness, sadness and mood swings. These are rare but if they occur, let your doctor or nurse know.



Hints & Tips – steroids



- Take steroids in the morning to try to avoid sleep problems.
- Take steroids with milk or food to prevent stomach upset.
- Talk to the hospital dietitian if you are putting on weight.
- Report any signs of infection to your doctor and nurse – a high temperature, cough, swelling or any inflammation.
- Take all tablets as instructed and don't stop taking steroids suddenly or without your doctor's advice.

Targeted therapies

Targeted therapies can stop cancer growing or spreading by targeting specific proteins and gene mutations that help the cancer to grow. For example, targeted therapy drugs called tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) are sometimes used to treat AML.

TKIs work by blocking an enzyme called tyrosine kinase, which makes the leukaemia cells grow and divide more quickly.

Targeted therapies can be used alone or with chemotherapy. Examples of TKIs include imatinib (Glivec®) and dasatinib (Sprycel®). New drug treatments are being developed all the time. Some new drugs may be available to you as part of a clinical trial. Ask your consultant about this. See page 68 for more about clinical trials.

What are the side-effects?

These drugs have some mild side-effects. Sometimes they can cause nausea and diarrhoea, fatigue, leg aches, muscle cramps, skin rashes and swelling of fingers, eyelids, face or lower legs. But these can be treated easily. Your skin may become more sensitive to sunlight when taking the drugs. As a result, you can develop skin rashes, itching, redness, severe sunburn and skin cancers. It is best to use a high protection sunscreen – at least factor 30 – when outdoors. You might be more prone to infection, anaemia and bleeding as well. Avoid taking grapefruit, grapefruit juice, pomegranate and Seville oranges. Chemicals in these fruits can stop TKIs from working properly.

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy helps your immune system to work better to fight cancer cells. Our immune system is often not good at recognising or clearing cancer cells from our body. Sometimes cancer cells find a way of hiding from the immune system, allowing cancer to develop or spread.

Immunotherapy treatments can change special immune cells to help them attack the cancer directly.

Side-effects of immunotherapy

Because immunotherapy acts on the immune system, it can cause inflammation of any part of your body, for example, your eyes, liver or skin.

Depending on the drugs used, side-effects can include:

- Diarrhoea
- Skin rash
- Tiredness
- Shortness of breath

Your doctor and nurse will explain your treatment to you in more detail and tell you about any likely side-effects. For more information or for a copy of the booklet *Understanding chemotherapy and other cancer drugs*, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

New developments



New immunotherapies are being developed all the time and existing therapies are being used in new ways. You may also be given an immunotherapy as part of a clinical trial (see page 68). Ask your doctor if there are any immunotherapies available to treat your cancer or if there are any trials that are suitable for you.

Stem cell transplants

Your doctor may recommend a transplant:

- As a first treatment for high-risk AML
- If your AML returns after treatment (relapse)

Stem cell transplants may not be suitable for everyone. It depends on a number of things such as:

- Your age and general health
- Whether a suitable donor is available
- The type of AML you have and the risk of it coming back.

How do transplants work?

A transplant works by destroying all the blood cells in your bone marrow and replacing them with healthy stem cells via a transfusion into your bloodstream. Stem cells are blood cells at their earliest stage of development that will grow into new healthy blood cells. The stem cells usually come from a donor. Stem cells are usually taken from the donor's blood, but they may also be taken from bone marrow. This is called an allogeneic transplant.

You can also have a transplant using your own cells, but this is less common. This type of transplant is called an autologous transplant.



How is an allogeneic (donor) transplant done?

In an allogeneic transplant, a patient receives healthy stem cells taken from another person.

You and the donor will have a blood test to see if you have the same tissue type. This means finding out about a group of proteins on the surface of cells called human leukocyte antigen (HLA). If you are HLA compatible it means you and the donor have similar proteins and there is more chance that the transplant will be successful. The donor can be your brother or sister, or even a person not related to you (matched unrelated donor or MUD).

Your own bone marrow is first destroyed with high doses of chemotherapy, with or without radiotherapy. Then the healthy marrow or stem cells from the donor are given to you through a central line (drip). The cells then grow over a few weeks to replace the bone marrow that was destroyed.

In an allogeneic transplant, healthy stem cells are taken from a donor and given to you.

Stem cell transplants take place in special treatment units. You may spend up to 6 weeks in hospital. For 6-12 months after the transplant you may have to go to hospital very often for check-ups, sometimes every day, for antibiotics or blood transfusions. If your doctor thinks a transplant is suitable for you, they will discuss the treatment with you in detail. For more information call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You could also ask for one of our transplant booklets.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials are research studies that try to find new or better ways of treating cancer or reducing side-effects.

Patients with cancer are sometimes asked to consider taking part in a clinical trial. This means that instead of the standard treatment you may get a new trial drug. Or you may be given existing treatments used in different ways. For example, giving a different dose of a drug or using two treatments together.

Because the drugs are still in trial, you'll be very closely monitored and may have extra tests and appointments.

Trials often investigate very specific features of a particular cancer or treatment, so you may not be suitable for a trial, even if it is researching your particular cancer. Your doctor can advise you about this.

More information

It's best to talk to your doctor if you're interested in taking part in a clinical trial. For more information, you can read our factsheet *Cancer and Clinical Trials*. It's available to read or download on our website, www.cancer.ie. You can also get a free copy by calling our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or by dropping into a Daffodil Centre. You can see a list of current cancer trials at www.cancertrials.ie

Supportive care

You will be monitored very closely during your treatment. It is likely that you will be given supportive care to help with the treatment side-effects and symptoms of your cancer. For example:

- You may need to have transfusions of blood and platelets to keep normal levels in your blood.
- You may be given tablets to help prevent infections while your immune system is more vulnerable. Your doctor will speak to you about this if you need it.

- You may need growth factor injections to help increase your white blood cell levels after chemotherapy (see page 61). If your white blood cell count is low, you are at risk of developing serious infections. You can still get infections despite these injections.
- If you develop an infection you will be started on antibiotics through the vein. You may be required to stay in hospital until your infection is gone.

There are lots of medications used to help treat other side-effects of treatments. Make sure you tell your doctor and nurse about any new symptoms. If your disease is at an advanced stage there are many things that can be done to make you comfortable.

Bone marrow tests will also be done regularly to check for leukaemia cells. Your doctors will let you know all these results. Depending on the results of these tests, your doctor may need to make changes to your treatment.

Palliative care

If your leukaemia is at an advanced stage you may be referred to the palliative care team. The palliative care team is very experienced in managing the symptoms of advanced cancer, such as breathlessness, pain and nausea. Palliative care also offers emotional support and comfort to patients and their families.

Palliative care includes end-of-life care, but your doctor may also recommend palliative care earlier in your illness, to help to manage your symptoms and improve your quality of life. The palliative care team can include specially trained doctors, nurses, social workers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, complementary therapists, chaplains and counsellors.

Palliative care can be arranged by your family doctor (GP), public health nurse or by the hospital. Palliative care is a free service for all patients with advanced cancer. You do not need medical insurance.



Managing side-effects and symptoms

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How can I cope with fatigue?

Fatigue means feeling extremely tired. Fatigue is a very common symptom of cancer. Usually fatigue improves once treatment is over, but it can carry on for some people. Tell your doctor or nurse if fatigue is affecting you, so that they can help you.

Fatigue when you have cancer can be caused by many things, including:

- The cancer itself
- Tests and treatments for cancer
- Not eating well
- Low levels of red blood cells (due to the cancer or its treatment)
- Dealing with difficult emotions and feeling anxious or depressed
- Not sleeping well
- Symptoms like pain, breathlessness or fluid retention

Finding out what is causing your fatigue makes it easier to treat. For example, if you have a low red blood cell count, a transfusion can make you feel better. If you are not eating well, a dietitian may be able to give you some advice to help you.



Hints & Tips – Fatigue



- Build rest periods into your day and save your energy for doing the things that are most important to you.
- Ask for help at work or at home, especially with cooking, housework or childcare.
- Try to eat well and drink plenty of fluids.
- Try to do some exercise – ask your doctor for advice about the best exercise for you. They may also be able to recommend an exercise programme for you.
- Try to avoid stress. Talk to friends and family about any worries you have and take time to enjoy yourself. Counselling (see page 94) may help too.
- If you are not sleeping well, try relaxation techniques and avoid stimulants like caffeine and alcohol before bedtime.
- Try complementary therapies if your doctor says they're safe for you. These might include meditation, aromatherapy or massage.

Our booklet *Coping with Fatigue* has more advice. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or call into a Daffodil Centre for a free copy. It's also on our website, www.cancer.ie.



Will treatment affect my sex life?

Cancer can affect how you feel about sex and your relationships. Coming to terms with the fact that you have cancer can take quite a while. It can be hard to relax as well when you have a lot of worries on your mind. You may also be feeling tired from the effects of treatment and lose interest in sex as a result.

There is no right or wrong way to feel about your sexuality and sex life. Even if you do not feel like having sex, you can still enjoy a close and loving relationship with your partner. Touching and holding each other can help you to stay physically close.



You may find that talking about your feelings may ease any worries you have. If you find it hard to express your feelings to your partner or a close friend, talk to your doctor or nurse. They may refer you for specialist relationships counselling or sex therapy. This can help you and your partner deal with a change in your sexual relationship and find ways of being close again.

There is no set time for you to be ready to have sex again. It varies from person to person. But you may find it will be some time before you will feel well enough to have sex again after treatment. Some people fear that cancer can be passed on to a partner during sex. There is no truth to this.

Contraception

If you are having sex and you are fertile, you should use a reliable method of contraception during and for some time after treatment. For example, some chemotherapy and other cancer drugs may harm a developing baby, so it's important to avoid pregnancy during and for a time after treatment. If you are of child-bearing age, you may be asked to have a pregnancy test prior to each cycle of treatment.

Many specialists recommend that you wait for up to 2 years after treatment before trying to start a family or having more children. This time gives your body a chance to recover from the effects of the cancer and its treatment. Ask your doctor's advice about contraception or if you are thinking about having children.

It can sometimes happen that you are pregnant when diagnosed with AML. If you are pregnant, your haematologist will get the advice of your obstetrician as soon as possible. They will decide if and when it is safe for you to start treatment. You can also discuss what options are open to you at this time.

Asking for advice

If you have any questions about how treatment may affect your sex life, you can ask your doctor or nurse. They are well used to talking about these matters, so try not to feel embarrassed. You can also call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can discuss any worries you might have with a cancer nurse in confidence. Or email the nurses at supportline@irishcancer.ie

Will treatment affect my fertility?

Some couples go on to have healthy babies after one or other partner has been treated for leukaemia. However, your fertility may be affected by some of the treatments, either temporarily or permanently.

Chemotherapy

Men: Chemotherapy can cause infertility in men. It may be temporary or permanent. Even though doctors know that some chemotherapy drugs may cause infertility it is very difficult to say if and when this will happen. You may be on treatment 2-3 months before your sperm count is reduced.

Women: Some chemotherapy drugs can affect your ovaries. This means that your periods may stop during or for a few months after treatment. You may also be given medication to control your menstrual bleeding during treatment.

If your ovaries are affected, you may get hot flushes, a dry vagina or other symptoms of the menopause. If it is temporary, your periods may return to normal after a few months. This happens in about a third of women who have short-term infertility brought on by chemotherapy. In general, the younger you are, the more likely it is that your regular periods will return and that you will still be able to have children.

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

Stem cell transplants

If you have a stem cell transplant you are likely to be permanently infertile after treatment – your doctor will talk to you about your options.

Discussing your options

Discuss any worries you have about infertility with your doctor before treatment starts. They will tell you if there are any options open to you.

Rotunda IVF at the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin provides a service where eggs or sperm can be frozen for later use. However, treatment normally needs to start quickly with AML, so this may not be possible, especially for egg storage, which can take a few weeks.

Coping with infertility

Coping with infertility can bring feelings of sadness, anger and loss of identity. It can help to talk through your worries with someone who is a good listener or with a professional counsellor. You can also call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre for information and support from a cancer nurse.

Cancer and complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are treatments and activities that you can have along with your standard medical treatment to try and feel better. For example, massage, counselling and meditation.

Complementary therapies can't treat or cure cancer, but some people say that complementary therapies help them to feel more relaxed and better able to cope with their illness and the side-effects of treatment.

It's very important to talk to your doctor if you're thinking of using complementary therapies. Some can interfere with your treatment or be harmful to you, even if you have used them safely before your diagnosis.

Integrative care

Integrative care means combining (integrating) your standard cancer treatment with complementary therapies to try to feel as well as possible and to cope better with your cancer.

What's the difference between complementary and alternative therapies?

Complementary therapies are used **together** with standard medical treatment.

Alternative therapies are used **instead of** standard medical care.

Modern medical treatments are very effective at curing cancer and keeping it under control. An unproven alternative could harm your health, or you might miss out on a treatment that could really help you.

More information

To find out more about complementary therapies, you can talk to one of our cancer nurses – call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can also ask for a free copy of our booklet *Understanding cancer and complementary therapies*, or download it from our website www.cancer.ie





After treatment

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What follow-up will I need?

After your cancer treatment has ended and you are in remission, you will still need to have regular check-ups. This is called follow-up. It is important for you to discuss any changes in your body or any new symptoms when you see the doctor. The doctor may order further tests. You will probably have more bone marrow tests to make sure you are still in remission.

At first, your follow-up visits will be quite often but will become less frequent the longer you are well and free from disease. During the first year you may be checked every 1–2 months. After 5 years you will have yearly check-ups. Sometimes you may need to go to hospital if you get an infection, as your immune system takes time to recover. If you are between check-ups and have a symptom or problem that is worrying you, call your specialist nurse for advice or to arrange an earlier outpatient appointment if necessary.

If you become suddenly unwell and can't contact your specialist nurse or hospital team, go to your GP or the emergency department at the hospital.



What if the AML relapses?

Sometimes the leukaemia cells return after being treated. This is called a relapse. With a relapse, the leukaemia cells can be found in either your blood, bone marrow, brain or spinal fluid. A relapse can happen even after you respond well to treatment.

Your doctor can decide if you have a low, moderate or high risk of relapsing. This is based on your white cell count at diagnosis and your response to your first treatment. You can relapse:

- While receiving treatment or soon after finishing treatment
- Months or years after your treatment

While on treatment: The reason you relapse while on treatment may be because the disease has become resistant to the drugs being used. This is known as refractory disease. In this case, other drugs that work well in leukaemia will be given to you. A stem cell transplant might also be considered as a treatment for some patients.

After treatment: It is not fully known why patients relapse after finishing treatment. A relapse can happen even after a good response to treatment. If you do relapse, you might receive the same chemotherapy drugs you were first treated with, as you responded well to them. More treatment may or may not include a stem cell transplant.

Your doctor will advise you about the best course of treatment for you if your leukaemia comes back.

Living with AML

Be involved in your healthcare

- Learn about AML so you understand your treatment and know what to expect.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. There are some questions you might like to ask on page 120.
- Keep all your appointments and take all your medications – ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions about your medication.
- Let your doctor know straight away if you have any new symptoms or any symptoms that are bothering you.
- Don't feel like you have to wait until your next appointment if you have any health problems or worries.

Take care of your health

- You may still feel tired and lacking in energy for months after treatment. You may not feel ready to lead as active a life as you did before treatment. It is better not to fight these feelings but to allow your body the time it needs to recover.
- Take precautions to avoid infections. See page 58 for advice.
- Contact your doctor straight away if you have signs of infection, symptoms of AML (see page 13), or any other health problems.
- If you develop any problems such as bowel problems, you should contact your doctor as soon as possible.
- Have regular dental and eye check-ups. Take good care of your mouth, teeth or dentures, as they can be a source of infection. Check with your haematologist before having dental treatment.
- Your skin will remain sensitive to the sun following chemotherapy and there can be an increased risk of developing skin cancer following treatment for AML. Wear protective clothing such as long sleeves and hats in the sun and always remember to wear sunscreen.

- Always tell doctors, dentists and other healthcare professionals that you have AML. If your white cell count or platelets are low it can increase your risk of bleeding or infection, so some procedures or treatments may not be suitable.

Vaccinations

It's important to have any vaccines recommended for you. For example, Covid-19, flu and pneumonia. You will probably be advised to get the flu vaccine every year and the pneumonia vaccine every 5 years. Leukaemia can weaken your immune system, so some vaccinations may not be suitable for you. Check with your doctor about which vaccinations are recommended for you and make sure you get them.

Living a healthy lifestyle

Many people want to focus on living healthily after a cancer diagnosis. Having a healthy lifestyle is important as it can help you to:

- Feel better
- Keep up your energy and strength
- Cope better with the side-effects of treatment

A healthy lifestyle includes:

- Exercising
- Staying at a healthy weight
- Not smoking
- Avoiding alcohol

Exercising is a great way to boost your mood and sense of well-being. Exercise can also improve your energy levels if you are feeling very tired. Talk to your doctor or nurse about which activity will suit you best.

If you want more information or advice, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can also go to our website www.cancer.ie for tips and publications on healthy living.

Mind your mental health

Living with cancer and coping with any symptoms can be stressful. The following may help:

- **Try to avoid additional stress wherever possible.** Spend time with your friends and family. Make time to relax and do the things that you enjoy.
- **Use stress-management techniques if you do feel stressed.** Try complementary therapies and relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation, mindfulness or aromatherapy. See page 78 for more about complementary therapies.
- **Give yourself time to get back to normal.** Once you feel better you may have financial or practical matters to sort out. Try not to let these overwhelm you and take one task at a time.
- **Counselling or a short course of medication may also help you,** if you are finding it hard to cope. See page 93 for more information.
- **Having the support of loved ones, healthcare professionals and other people going through a similar illness** can also make a big difference. See page 94 for more about getting support.



Work and activities

Once you are on treatment and start to feel well, you should talk to your doctor about returning to work or study and carrying on with your usual activities like socialising, sports and hobbies. If you stopped working during treatment, you might want to take your return to work slowly, by working part-time or reduced hours.



Holidays and insurance

You may decide to go on a holiday once your AML is under control.

If you are planning a holiday, ask your doctor about any special precautions you need to take or vaccinations you should have before you go. It's best to have travel insurance too. We have information on travel insurance on our website, www.cancer.ie

You can also contact our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre for more details.

Planning ahead

Many people find it puts their mind at rest to have medical plans in place and sort out legal and practical matters, even though they still hope to live for a long time.

Planning ahead is useful for everyone, whether they have an illness or not.

Planning ahead might include:

- **Thinking about how you feel about different types of medical treatment**, including if you want to stop treatment at any stage or carry on for as long as possible.
- **Writing an advance care directive.** This is where you can write down your wishes about your medical care. Doctors can use this if you are not well enough to say what you want.
- **Picking someone to make medical decisions for you** if you are not well enough.
- **Making a will.**
- **Sorting out financial affairs.**
- **Talking about what you want** to your family, friends, carers and healthcare providers.

Who can help me plan?

Think Ahead is a planning booklet with easy-to-read forms to fill in to record your personal, medical, financial and legal information and preferences. It's available from the Irish Hospice Foundation at www.hospicefoundation.ie





Coping and emotions

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How can I cope with my feelings?

Some people say that trying to cope with their thoughts and feelings is the hardest part of having cancer. You may find it hard to come to terms with your diagnosis, you may blame yourself, resent other people who are healthy or feel very anxious or depressed.

Emotions like sadness, fear, grief, hopelessness and anger can happen at different times, sometimes months or years after treatment.

A cancer diagnosis can be hard on you – mentally and emotionally. Give yourself time and space to deal with your emotions, and get help if you need it.

A helpful booklet that discusses in detail how you may be feeling is called *Understanding the Emotional Effects of Cancer*. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre for a free copy.

Anxiety and depression

If you feel that anxiety or low moods are getting the better of you or you're finding it hard to cope, it's important to get help. Try to talk with someone you know who is a good listener, join a support group or tell your GP. Medical social workers can also offer support to you and your family.

Your doctor may also suggest medication to help with anxiety or depression. Often a short course of medication can work well. Professional counselling can also be very helpful.

Counselling

If you're feeling very distressed or finding it hard to cope, a trained counsellor who is not involved in your situation can help you to express your feelings, worries and fears and make sense of them.

It's not a sign of failure to ask for help or to feel unable to cope on your own.

Counselling can also give you emotional support, help you to make decisions and learn ways to cope better.

Free one-to-one counselling is available through some local cancer support centres. To find out more about counselling call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. Or email the nurses at supportline@irishcancer.ie. A list of counsellors funded by the Irish Cancer Society is available at www.cancer.ie.

Ways to get emotional support



Find out about cancer support services in your area: Most provide a range of helpful services like counselling, complementary therapies, exercise programmes and other activities. They can also give you practical advice and support. See page 116 for more about cancer support services.

Join a support or educational group: You might find it reassuring to talk to other people who are in a similar situation and facing similar challenges. Many cancer support centres have activities and groups where you can meet other people affected by cancer.

Ask about psycho-oncology services at the hospital:

Hospital psycho-oncology services give cancer patients emotional and psychological support to help them cope.

Your doctor, specialist nurse or medical social worker can refer you to psycho-oncology support services.

'Counselling has helped me with every part of my life.'

Get online support: Special websites called online communities let you write questions, share stories, and give and receive advice and support. Visit www.cancer.ie/community to join the Irish Cancer Society online community.

Talk things through: It can be a great weight off your mind to share your feelings and worries. You could talk to a friend or family member if you feel comfortable doing so. You could also speak to the medical social worker at the hospital or to one of our cancer nurses.

Seek spiritual support: For some people spiritual and religious beliefs can bring comfort and hope. Practices such as prayer or meditation may help you to focus on what has value and meaning in your life.

If you need more information or help with finding support, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or drop into a Daffodil Centre.

Survivor support



Survivor Support is the Irish Cancer Society's one-to-one support programme. You can be put in contact with a trained volunteer who has dealt with a cancer diagnosis. Volunteers give support, practical information and reassurance. Call 1800 200 700 for more information or visit a Daffodil Centre.

Positive feelings



In time, some people say they can find positive things in their cancer experience. They say that cancer brought them closer to the people around them or made them appreciate what's important in life. Or it opened up new experiences and relationships. Getting support, such as counselling, may help you to come to terms with your diagnosis and feel more positive.

'I am very happy and content ... even though I have to live with this.'

Talking about cancer made it less awful and helped ease my fears. I learned to cope and understand myself better.'

You and your family

Every family deals with cancer in its own way. You may feel that you don't want your illness to upset family life, feel guilty that you can't join in as much as before, or that you're letting down your partner or children. You may also worry about the emotional impact your illness will have on your loved ones. Our booklet *Understanding the Emotional Effects of Cancer* can help to you find ways to talk about your cancer and to ask for the help and support you need.



Further information and support

If you or your family members need more support or advice, speak to the medical social worker at the hospital or get in touch with one of our cancer nurses. Call us on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre. The nurses can also support you if you have children and aren't sure what to say to them. You could also read our booklet *Talking to Children about Cancer*, which has practical advice about how to talk to children of different ages.

Changing relationships



You may feel that people are treating you differently. Some people may withdraw and not contact you as much because they are afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing. Others may not understand that you feel too unwell to go out. Try to talk openly to your friends and family if there are any misunderstandings or problems. Tell them how you feel. If you find it hard, ask another family member or friend to talk to them.



Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

Advice for carers

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Supporting someone with cancer

Finding out someone you love has cancer and trying to care for them can be difficult. You might be unsure about how best to support them, practically or emotionally. You might also be struggling with your own feelings and responsibilities. Here are some things that can help to make life a little easier:

Learn about cancer

Try to go to hospital visits and also read any information from the hospital so you can understand your loved one's illness and treatment, how it might affect them, physically and emotionally, and how you can best support them. Visit our website www.cancer.ie or call our Support Line for free copies of our cancer information booklets.

Share worries

If you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed, share your worries with someone else. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or drop into a Daffodil Centre if you want to chat to a cancer nurse in confidence.



Be kind to yourself

Your health and happiness matter too. Make some time for yourself, stay in touch with your friends and don't be afraid to let other people help out with the caring.

Try counselling

You might find it helpful to talk to a counsellor. Free one-to-one counselling is available to friends and family members through our affiliated cancer support centres. Talk to your GP or see page 94.

Find out about support for carers

Find out about groups and organisations for carers of people with cancer. Many local cancer support centres have services for carers too.

Support for you



Our cancer nurses are there to support you. Call our Support Line on 1800 200 700, visit a Daffodil Centre or email supportline@irishcancer.ie for confidential support, advice and information.

Our booklet, *Caring for someone with cancer*, has lots of information on:

- Getting organised
- Managing and giving medications
- Giving personal care
- Practical and money matters
- Relationships with other people
- Looking after yourself
- Life after caring

Free copies are available from our Daffodil Centres and our Support Line, or download it from our website www.cancer.ie

How to talk to someone with cancer



When someone close to you has cancer it can be hard to know what to say. You may find it difficult to talk about their cancer. Or you may be afraid of saying the wrong thing. Often what people with cancer want most is someone to listen to them.

The booklet *Caring for someone with cancer* has a section on how to talk to someone with cancer. It also has tips to help you to feel more confident about supporting your friend or relative. You can pick up a copy at your local Daffodil Centre.





Support resources

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Money matters



- If you have cancer you may not be able to work for a time. You may also have extra expenses.
- You may have to pay for some of your cancer treatment.
- You might be entitled to certain social welfare payments.
- There are services to help you if you're finding it hard to manage.

A diagnosis of cancer often means that you will have extra expenses, like car parking during hospital visits, medication, travel, heating and childcare costs. If you can't work or you are unemployed, this may cause even more stress. It may be harder for you to deal with cancer if you are worried about money.

Medical expenses

Medical expenses that you might have to pay include:

- Visits to your family doctor (GP)
- Visits to hospital
- Overnight stays in hospital
- Medicines
- Medical aids and equipment (appliances), like wigs

How much you pay towards your medical expenses depends on whether or not you qualify for a medical card and what type of health insurance you have, if any.

If you have a medical card, you will probably have very little to pay for hospital and GP (family doctor) care or your medication. If you are over 70, you can get a free GP visit card.

Medical cards are usually for people on low incomes, but sometimes a card can be given even if your income is above the limit. For example, if you have a large amount of medical expenses. This is known as a discretionary medical card.

An emergency medical card may be issued if you are terminally ill and in palliative care, irrespective of your income.

If you don't have a medical card you will have to pay some of the cost of your care and medication.

If you have health insurance the insurance company will pay some of the costs, but the amount will depend on your insurance plan. It's important to contact your insurance company before starting treatment to check you're covered.

Benefits and allowances

There are benefits that can help people who are ill and their family. For example, Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Carer's Leave.

If you want more information on benefits and allowances, contact:

- **The medical social worker** in the hospital you are attending
- **Citizens Information** – Tel: 0761 074 000
- **Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection** – Tel: 1890 662 244 or ask to speak to a DSP representative at your local health centre or DSP office.

Always have your PPS number to hand when you are asking about entitlements and benefits. It's also a good idea to photocopy completed forms before posting them.

If you have money problems

If you are getting into debt or you are in debt, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) can help you. MABS can look at your situation, work out your budget, help you to deal with your debts and manage your payments. The service is free and confidential. Call the MABS Helpline 0761 07 2000 for information.



If you are finding it hard to cope financially, contact your medical social worker in the hospital or your local health centre for advice. The Irish Cancer Society can also give some help towards travel costs in certain cases. See page 113 for more details of our Volunteer Driver Service and the Travel2Care fund.

You can also call our Support Line 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre and the nurse will suggest ways to help you manage.

More information

Go to www.cancer.ie and see our **money advice page** for information on:

- **Medical costs and help available**
- **Benefits and allowances that you or your family may qualify for**
- **Travel services**
- **Ways to cope with the cost of cancer**

Our Benefits Hub on our website has lots of information on government supports for people who are unwell and their carers. It also has advice on how to apply.

Irish Cancer Society services

Our Cancer Support Department provides a range of cancer support services for people with cancer, at home and in hospital, including:

- **Cancer Support Line**
- **Daffodil Centres**
- **Survivor Support**
- **Support in your area**
- **Patient travel and financial support services**
- **Night nursing**
- **Publications and website information**

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

Call our Support Line and speak to one of our cancer nurses for confidential advice, support and information.

The Support Line is open Monday–Friday, 9am to 5pm. You can also email us at any time on supportline@irishcancer.ie or visit our Online Community at www.cancer.ie

For the deaf community, our Support Line is using the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) using IRIS. Contact IRIS by text 087 980 6996 or email: remote@slis.ie



Daffodil Centres

Visit our Daffodil Centres, located in 13 hospitals nationwide. The centres are staffed by cancer nurses and trained volunteers who provide free, confidential advice, support and information to anyone concerned about or affected by cancer.



Who can use the Daffodil Centres?

Daffodil Centres are open to everyone – you don't need an appointment. Just call in if you want to talk or need information on any aspect of cancer including:

- Cancer treatments and side-effects
- Chemotherapy group education sessions
- Emotional support
- Practical entitlements and services
- Living with and beyond cancer
- End-of-life services
- Lifestyle and cancer prevention
- Local cancer support groups and centres

You can email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie or visit www.cancer.ie to find your local Daffodil Centre.

Survivor Support



Speak to someone who has been through a cancer diagnosis. Our trained volunteers are available to provide emotional and practical support to anyone going through or finished with their treatment.

Support in your area

We work with cancer support groups and centres and the National Cancer Control Programme to ensure cancer patients and their families have access to high-quality, confidential support in a location that's convenient to them. The Society funds professional one-to-one counselling (including telephone and video-call counselling) and group survivorship programmes in communities across the country.

For information about what's available near you, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or go to www.cancer.ie and search 'Find support'.

Patient travel and financial support services



We provide practical and financial support for patients in need, travelling to and from their cancer appointments. There are two services available through the Society:

- **Travel2Care** is a limited fund, made available by the National Cancer Control Programme, for patients who are travelling for cancer tests or treatment to one of the national designated cancer centres or their approved satellite centres. Patients must be travelling over 50km one way to access the fund.
- **Irish Cancer Society Volunteer Driver Service** is mainly for patients undergoing chemotherapy treatments who are having difficulty getting to and from their local appointments in our partner hospitals.

To access either of these services please contact your hospital healthcare professional.

Irish Cancer Society Night Nursing



We provide end-of-life care for cancer patients in their own home. We offer up to 10 nights of care for each patient. Our service allows patients to remain at home for the last days of their lives surrounded by their families and loved ones. This is a unique service in Ireland, providing palliative nursing care at night between 11pm and 7am to cancer patients.

The health professional who is looking after your loved one can request a night nurse for you, so talk to your palliative care team member, GP or public health nurse about this.

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

Publications and website information



We provide information on a range of topics including cancer types, treatments and side-effects, coping with cancer, children and cancer, and financial concerns. Visit our website www.cancer.ie or call our Support Line for free copies of our publications.

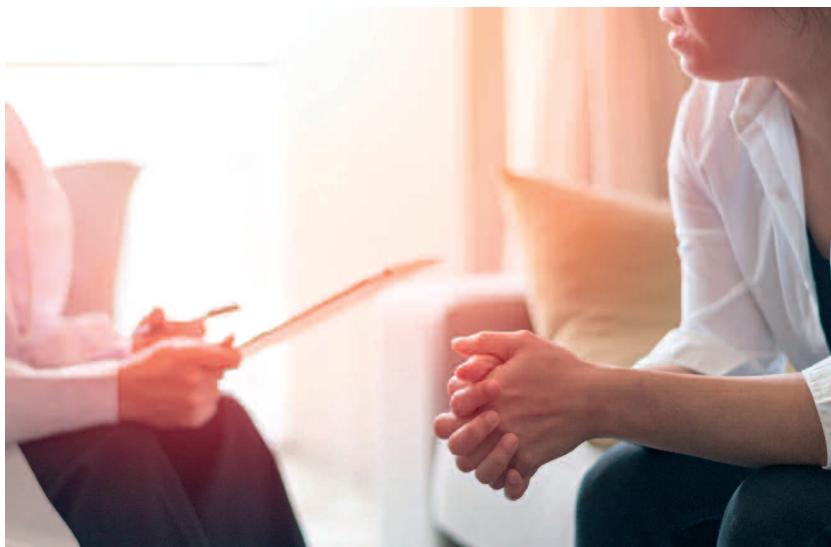
If you would like more information on any of our services, call our Support Line on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

Local cancer support services

The Irish Cancer Society works with cancer support services all over Ireland. They have a range of services for cancer patients and their families, during and after treatment, many of which are free.

For example:

- **Professional counselling** (the Irish Cancer Society funds up to 8 sessions of free one-to-one counselling in many affiliated support services)



- **Specialist services** such as prosthesis or wig fitting and manual lymph drainage
- **Mind and body sessions**, for example, yoga and tai chi
- **Expressive therapies** such as creative writing and art
- **Free Irish Cancer Society publications** and other high-quality, trustworthy information on a range of topics

Cancer support services usually have a drop-in service where you can call in for a cup of tea and find out what's available.



- **Support groups**, often led by professionals like social workers, counsellors, psychologists, or cancer nurses
- **Special exercise programmes**, like the Irish Cancer Society's *Strides for Life* walking group programme
- **Stress management and relaxation techniques**, such as mindfulness and meditation
- **Complementary therapies** like massage, reflexology and acupuncture

You can call our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 to find your nearest cancer support centre. Or see our online directory at <http://www.cancer.ie/support/support-in-your-area/directory>

What does that word mean?

Allogeneic The use of another person's tissue. For example, when healthy stem cells are taken from another person for a transplant.

Alopecia Loss of hair. No hair where you normally have hair.

Anaemia When there are fewer red blood cells in your blood. This can cause tiredness and shortness of breath.

Autologous The use of a person's own tissue. For example, when cells are taken from your bone marrow or blood.

Biopsy Removing a small amount of tissue from your body and looking at it under a microscope to see if leukaemia cells are present.

Blast cell The immature myeloid cells that fill up your bone marrow and prevent normal blood cells from being made.

Bone marrow The soft spongy material found in the centre of large bones. It makes red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets.

Bone marrow aspirate When a sample of bone marrow cells or bone aspirate or biopsy is taken and looked at under a microscope.

Cells The building blocks that make up your body. They are tiny and can only be seen under a microscope.

Chemotherapy Treatment that uses drugs to cure or control cancer.

Chromosomes Tiny structures that contain the genetic information of the cells in your body.

Cytogenetics Tests that look at the chromosomes of leukaemia cells.

Growth factors Medicines that help increase the number of red cells, white cells or platelets in your blood.

Haematologist A doctor who specialises in treating patients with abnormal blood or bone marrow.

Immunophenotyping A test that checks what kind of proteins or markers are found on the surface of leukaemia cells.

Intravenous Into a vein.

Leukaemia Cancer of the white blood cells and blood marrow.

Lymphocytes A type of white blood cell that helps fight infection.

Neutropenia Fewer white blood cells called neutrophils in your body. As a result, you develop infections easily.

Neutrophils Important white blood cells that fight infection.

Petechiae Bleeding under your skin, usually on your legs, feet, trunk and arms, due to a low platelet count.

Platelets Blood cells responsible for clotting.

Prognosis The likely outcome or course of a disease.

Red blood cells Blood cells that carry oxygen to all parts of your body.

Relapse When the leukaemia returns after treatment.

Remission When there are no signs of leukaemia in your blood and bone marrow.

Stem cell The smallest and earliest cells found in bone marrow. They are responsible for making all blood cells.

Thrombocytopaenia When there are fewer platelets in your blood. This can cause you to bleed and bruise easily.

White blood cells Blood cells that help fight infection. There are 5 types: neutrophils, eosinophils, basophils, monocytes and lymphocytes.

Questions to ask your doctor

Here is a list of questions that you might like to ask your doctor. There is also some space for you to write down your own questions if you wish. Never be shy about asking questions. It is always better to ask than to worry.

What type of AML do I have?

What type of treatment do I need?

Why is this treatment better for me?

How successful is this treatment for my leukaemia?

How long will my treatment take?

Do I have to stay in hospital for my treatment?

Would I be suitable for a clinical trial?

Will my blood cell count return to normal after treatment?

What side-effects or after-effects will I get?

Can some of the side-effects be controlled?

Is there anything I can do to help myself during treatment?

Do I need to use contraception during my treatment? What will happen if I, or my partner, get pregnant?

Should I eat special foods?

How will you know if the leukaemia is in remission?

Your own questions

Acknowledgments

This booklet has been produced by the Irish Cancer Society to meet the need for improved communication, information and support for cancer patients and their families throughout diagnosis and treatment. We would like to thank all those patients, families and professionals whose support and advice made this publication possible. We especially thank the people who generously shared their personal experiences of cancer throughout this booklet. We also acknowledge the contribution of the many consultants, nurses and other healthcare professionals who so kindly gave up their time and expertise to contribute to previous editions of this booklet.

LEUKAEMIA ADVISERS

Siobhán Glavey, Consultant Haematologist and Pathology Chair RCSI
Rachel Fox, Advanced Nurse Practitioner Haematology

CONTRIBUTOR

Phil Harford, Daffodil Centre Nurse

EDITOR

Claire McGinn

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Join the Irish Cancer Society team

If you want to make a difference to people affected by cancer, join our team!

Support people affected by cancer

Reaching out directly to people with cancer is one of the most rewarding ways to help:

- Help people needing lifts to hospital by becoming a volunteer driver
- Give one-on-one support to someone newly diagnosed with cancer as part of our Survivor Support programme
- Give information and support to people concerned about or affected by cancer at one of our hospital-based Daffodil Centres

Share your experiences

Use your voice to bring reassurance to cancer patients and their families, help people to connect with our services or inspire them to get involved as a volunteer:

- Share your cancer story
- Tell people about our services
- Describe what it's like to organise or take part in a fundraising event

Raise money

All our services are funded by the public's generosity:

- Donate direct
- Take part in one of our fundraising events or challenges
- Organise your own event

Contact our Support Line on Freephone 1800 200 700 if you want to get involved!

Did you like this booklet?

We would love to hear your comments or suggestions.

Please email reviewers@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society

43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4, D04 VX65

T: 01 231 0500

E: info@irishcancer.ie

W: www.cancer.ie

Support Line Freephone 1800 200 700

Email: supportline@irishcancer.ie

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