

Understanding multiple myeloma

Multiple myeloma is a cancer of the blood. It affects a part of your bone called the bone marrow. There are approximately 71,000 people in the United States living with multiple myeloma.¹

In the bone marrow, special cells called plasma cells are produced that help you fight diseases.² People with multiple myeloma have plasma cells that have become cancerous. When this happens, plasma cells multiply uncontrollably in the bone marrow and prevent you from making enough normal blood cells that fight infections and other diseases.

If you have multiple myeloma you may also develop tumors in your bones and in multiple parts of your body.

Cancerous plasma cells make a substance called M-protein. Having too much M-protein in your blood can damage your kidneys.

Multiple myeloma can also damage the bones and make you have too much calcium in your blood. Too much calcium in your blood can cause damage to your kidneys, nerves, heart, muscles, and stomach as well as other parts of your body.

Risk factors

While nobody knows for sure what causes multiple myeloma, some known risk factors include:

Age: Most people with multiple myeloma are over 65. Between 2001 and 2005, the average age was 70.

Race: Individuals of African descent are at higher risk for multiple myeloma.

MGUS: Some people have a condition called MGUS (the abbreviation of its technical name, monoclonal gammopathy of unknown significance). It is not a cancerous condition, but if you have MGUS you are more likely to develop multiple myeloma and other blood cancers.

Symptoms

Some people with multiple myeloma have many symptoms and some do not have any. Here are some of the most common symptoms:

- Bone pain, especially in your back
- Broken bones, especially in your thighs and back
- Feeling very tired
- Feeling very thirsty
- Lots of illnesses and fevers
- Losing weight
- Feeling sick

- Constipation
- Frequent urination

Diagnosis

Some people find out they have multiple myeloma after a routine physical, blood test or X-rays. Others tell their doctor that they are not feeling well, and because of their symptoms their doctors will perform various tests to make a diagnosis. Your doctor may also decide to take a sample of your bone marrow for additional testing.

Treatment

If you are diagnosed with multiple myeloma, the type of treatment you receive will depend on several things, for instance what symptoms you have. Some common treatments include:

- Anticancer drugs
- Stem cell transplantation
- Radiation therapy

Your doctor will talk with you to decide what treatment is right for you.

References:

- 1) MattsonJack. CancerMPact. Available at: <http://www.mattsonjack.com>. Accessed January 27, 2009.
- 2) National Cancer Institute. Multiple myeloma and other plasma cell neoplasms: treatment (PDQ®)—patient version. Available at: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/myeloma/patient>. Accessed November 29, 2007.

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