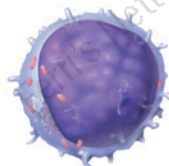


MANAGING YOUR HAIRY CELL LEUKEMIA



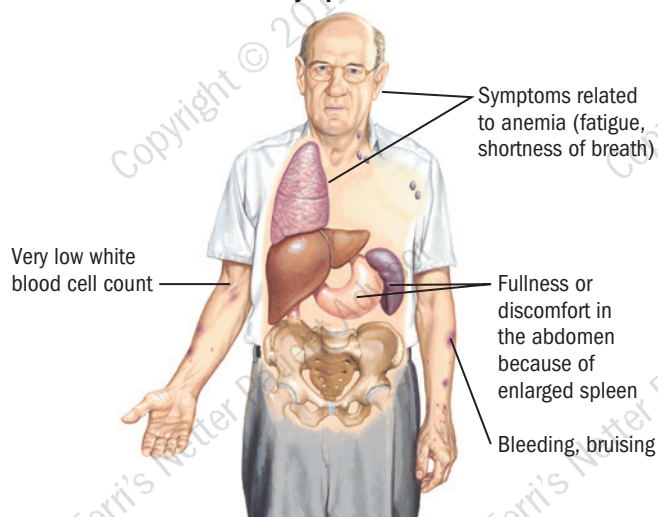
White blood cell (lymphocyte)

F. Netter M.D.

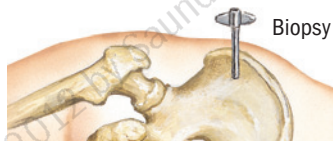


Hairy cell leukemia is a rare cancer of B cells, or lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell. This leukemia is more common among men than women, usually middle-aged. The cause is unknown.

Symptoms



Other symptoms include getting more infections than usual and weight loss.



Biopsy

Your health care provider makes a diagnosis from a medical history, blood tests that show the hairy white blood cells, physical examination, and sometimes bone marrow biopsy.

What Is Hairy Cell Leukemia?

Hairy cell leukemia is a rare kind of blood cancer (malignancy). It's a disease of B cells, or lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell. The name refers to the hairy look of the cells under a microscope. This kind of leukemia is more common among men than women, usually middle-aged. About 2% of all leukemia cases are hairy cell leukemia.

What Causes Hairy Cell Leukemia?

The cause is unknown. No chemical or radiation exposure has been linked to the disease. DNA mutations cause bone marrow stem cells to make too many malignant white blood cells. Why these mutations occur isn't known. The disease isn't contagious or inherited.

What Are the Symptoms of Hairy Cell Leukemia?

Abnormal cells get into the spleen and bone marrow, which leads to symptoms. These include fullness or discomfort in the abdomen (belly) because of the enlarged spleen. Low red blood cell counts (anemia) cause fatigue or shortness of breath. Very low white blood cell counts (neutropenia) mean people are more prone to infections. Low platelet counts (thrombocytopenia) cause easy bruising or bleeding. Weight loss can also occur.

How Is Hairy Cell Leukemia Diagnosed?

The health care provider makes a preliminary diagnosis from the medical history, blood tests, and physical examination. The final diagnosis depends on finding the special hairy white blood cells in the blood. A referral will be made to a blood specialist (hematologist). A biopsy of bone marrow is performed. In this biopsy, the hematologist takes a sample of bone marrow for study with a microscope and performs additional tests on the bone marrow sample.



Not everyone needs treatment right away. Low blood counts and symptoms caused by an enlarged spleen mean treatment is needed. Chemotherapy often leads to lasting complete remission.



Get a flu shot every fall. Consider pneumonia immunizations also.



Call your health care provider if you have a fever or bleeding that doesn't stop after pressure is put on the area for 5 minutes.



Learn all you can about your illness. Find a support group if you think that would help.



Avoid contact sports, brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush, and shave with an electric razor if you have a low platelet count.



Don't eat uncooked fruits, vegetables, and milk products if you have a very low white blood cell count.

How Is Hairy Cell Leukemia Treated?

Not everyone needs treatment right away because this blood cancer usually progresses very slowly. Low blood counts and symptoms caused by an enlarged spleen mean treatment is needed. Treatment consists of chemotherapy. Chemotherapy often leads to lasting complete remission of hairy cell leukemia. New drugs include cladribine (2-CDA) and 2 deoxycoformycin (DCF, pentostatin). About three-fourths of people have a complete response. Side effects include a temporary decrease in blood counts and numbness and tingling in fingers and toes. Interferon or rituximab might be tried if chemotherapy doesn't work or isn't possible.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Hairy Cell Leukemia:

- ✓ **DO** participate in your chemotherapy regimen as prescribed by your health care provider.
- ✓ **DO** get a flu shot every fall. Consider pneumonia immunizations also.
- ✓ **DO** avoid contact sports, brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush, and shave with an electric razor if you have a low platelet count.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have a fever or bleeding that doesn't stop after pressure is put on the area for 5 minutes.
- ✓ **DO** learn all you can about your illness.
- ✓ **DO** find a support group if you think that would help.
- ⊘ **DON'T** eat uncooked fruits, vegetables, and milk products if you have a very low white blood cell count.

FROM THE DESK OF

NOTES

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following source:

- American Cancer Society
Tel: (1-800) ACS-2345
Website: <http://www.cancer.org>
- National Cancer Institute
Tel: (1-800) 4-CANCER
Website: <http://www.nci.nih.gov>
- Leukemia Society of America
Tel: (1-800) 955 4LSA