What is multiple myeloma?

Multiple myeloma is a rare disease that represents about two percent of all cancers.\(^1\) It’s an incurable blood cancer of the plasma cells, a type of white blood cell which originates in the bone marrow.\(^2,3\) Plasma cells produce antibodies that help fight infection.\(^3\) When plasma cells become cancerous and multiply too quickly, they are called myeloma cells.\(^3\)

Myeloma is called “multiple” because there are often multiple patches or areas in the body where it grows.\(^3\)

How common is multiple myeloma?

Although rare, multiple myeloma is the 2nd most common blood cancer in the world.\(^4\) An estimated 30,770 new cases will be diagnosed in the U.S. in 2018.\(^3\) The National Cancer Institute estimates that in 2015, more than 120,000 people were living with the disease in the U.S.\(^1\)

What are the signs and symptoms of multiple myeloma?

Multiple myeloma symptoms can vary from person to person. Some patients experience no symptoms at all. Others may experience some of the following symptoms:\(^5,6\)

- Bone problems
- Nausea and vomiting
- Constipation
- Loss of appetite and weight loss
- Mental fogginess or confusion
- Fatigue
- Frequent infections
- Excessive thirst
What factors might increase the chances of someone developing multiple myeloma?

Some factors that may increase the chances of developing multiple myeloma include: 1,3,6

- **Age**: Though it can be diagnosed in younger people, multiple myeloma is most common in people between the ages of 65-74.
- **Gender**: Multiple myeloma is slightly more common in men than in women. Approximately 53 percent of new cases diagnosed in the U.S. in 2018 will be in men.
- **Race**: African Americans are more than twice as likely to develop multiple myeloma than white Americans. The reason for this is unknown.
- **Family History**: A person with a sibling or parent with multiple myeloma is more likely to develop the disease than someone who does not have family history. However, this only accounts for a small percentage of diagnoses.

While these risk factors are important, patients who have no risk factors are sometimes diagnosed with multiple myeloma as well.

What is the prognosis for someone diagnosed with multiple myeloma?

While there is no cure for multiple myeloma, survival expectations have improved significantly in recent years. 2,8 In the 1990s, patients typically lived two to three years following a multiple myeloma diagnosis. 8 Now, many patients are living seven to 10 years, and sometimes longer. 8,9

The prognosis of multiple myeloma is usually based on the existence of different signs, symptoms, how aggressive the disease is, and the extent of disease spread. 10 Other factors may also help determine when multiple myeloma treatment should begin, and which treatment is best according to a person’s individual risk for relapse. 10

What can I expect following diagnosis?

Following diagnosis, your physician will assess whether or not you need to begin treatment. If you are not exhibiting symptoms of multiple myeloma, you may not need to begin therapy. However, if you do require treatment, your physician will work with you to find the best treatment option to try to get you into remission, which is a decrease or disappearance of signs and symptoms of multiple myeloma. 11

Unfortunately, the disease returns in nearly all patients. 12 This is known as a relapse and multiple myeloma is often characterized by recurring cycles of relapse and remission. 13 For this reason, patients with multiple myeloma often need several different combinations of therapies during their journey with the disease. 14
How will my physician decide what treatment option is best for me?

Receiving the right treatment(s) for multiple myeloma is crucial. There are several factors that drive treatment decisions such as: age and general health, lab test results, symptoms and disease complications, prior myeloma treatment, and your personal treatment goals.5

However, no two individuals with multiple myeloma are exactly the same.5 Following a diagnosis, patients will work closely with their oncologist to develop a treatment plan tailored to their individual needs.

Where can I find out more about multiple myeloma?

Multiple myeloma is a very individualized disease. For that reason, your oncologist will be able to provide you with information best suited to your needs.5 There are also many helpful independent nonprofit organizations and resources that can provide more background information on multiple myeloma.

References