

# Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia

When the bone marrow produces too many white blood cells

## What is it?

All blood cells (red, white, and platelets) are produced by the bone marrow. *Leukemia* is a type of cancer in which the bone marrow produces too many blood cells. *Lymphocytic leukemia* is when the bone marrow produces too many *lymphocytes*, a type of white blood cell. *Chronic* refers to a cancer that develops slowly over a long period of time.

### Who gets CLL?

Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) is the most common adult leukemia in Canada. It usually occurs in older adults. Men are affected more often than women.

### What causes CLL?

CLL is caused by multiple genetic changes (*mutations*) in white blood cells. There are several possible risk factors for developing these mutations:

- Older age
- Male sex
- Exposure to certain pesticides, including Agent Orange

Research has shown that blood transfusions are **NOT** a risk factor for CLL.

## What will it do to me?

Over-production of white blood cells means that these cancerous cells slowly build up in the bone marrow, blood, and lymph nodes. They can crowd out the healthy blood cells and prevent them from doing their jobs.

CLL develops gradually over time, and you may not experience any symptoms at first. CLL is most often discovered by chance, when your blood work shows that you have too many white blood cells.

Symptoms of CLL include:

- Fatigue
- Fever
- Drenching night sweats
- Unexplained weight loss
- Reduced appetite
- Swelling of the lymph nodes
- More frequent infections

While CLL is not curable, it progresses slowly in most cases. People with CLL often lead normal and active lives for many years. Starting the right type of treatment at the right time can assist with this goal.

## What can I do?

CLL treatment focuses on controlling disease progression and relieving symptoms.

### Decision to start treatment

In the early stages of CLL, many people do not experience any symptoms and therefore do not need to start active treatment yet.

CLL progresses slowly and research has not shown that starting early treatment improves quality of life or survival time.

In this stage, your doctor will carefully monitor your symptoms and your blood work.

Many people decide to start treatment when the disease progresses to the point of affecting their quality of life.

### Treatment options

- Chemotherapy, to reduce the number of cancerous white blood cells
- Immunotherapy, to reduce the number of cancerous white blood cells
- Radiation therapy, to target swollen lymph nodes

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**Patient-doctor learning area:** Use this area to write down questions for your doctor or use it as a space for your doctor to answer your questions.



**Still have questions? Ask us @ [teachandlearnfm.com](https://teachandlearnfm.com)**