Plasma Cell Leukaemia

Plasma cell leukaemia (PCL) is a rare type of cancer arising from plasma cells. It belongs to the same spectrum of blood cancers as myeloma. It is considered to be a more advanced form of myeloma and usually requires more intensive monitoring and treatment.

What is PCL?

PCL is characterised by unusually high levels of abnormal plasma cells in the blood.

In myeloma, the majority of the abnormal plasma cells remain in the bone marrow. In PCL a significant proportion of the abnormal plasma cells leave the bone marrow and are released into the blood. In PCL patients, abnormal plasma cells make up more than 20% of the total number of white blood cells present in the peripheral (circulating) blood.

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There are two types of PCL:

- **Primary PCL** – diagnosed in patients with no history of myeloma
- **Secondary PCL** – occurs after a previous myeloma diagnosis and arises when myeloma progresses to PCL

About 1 in 100 myeloma patients will develop secondary PCL and the likelihood of this occurring is thought to be associated with a greater accumulation of genetic abnormalities in certain myeloma patients. However, at present, little is understood about the genetic differences between myeloma and PCL and there is no way of predicting which myeloma patients will progress to PCL.

As understanding of the link between myeloma and PCL improves, it may be possible to determine which myeloma patients are at greater risk of developing PCL.

Who develops PCL?

PCL is rare. It is estimated that 1 per million of the general population are diagnosed with primary PCL each year, while approximately 1 in 100 myeloma patients will go on to develop secondary PCL. The average time for myeloma to develop into secondary PCL is 21 months.

The average age of diagnosis is 55 years old, which is slightly younger than in myeloma where the average age at diagnosis is 65 years old.
Both primary and secondary PCL are slightly more common in men than in women, and in the Afro-Caribbean and African populations than in the Caucasian population.

**What causes PCL?**

The exact causes of PCL are not fully understood. Like myeloma, a series of genetic changes during the development of a plasma cell is thought to lead to its uncontrolled growth. However, what triggers these changes is not known. Exposure to additional risk factors is thought to play an important role, including age and exposure to industrial and environmental factors.

**What are the symptoms and complications of PCL?**

PCL patients normally present with similar symptoms and complications to myeloma, however they tend to be more severe. Symptoms and complications include:

- Bone pain
- Fatigue
- Recurrent infections
- Bleeding
- Hypercalcaemia (high blood calcium levels)
- Kidney damage

Patients may also have an enlarged liver or spleen caused by a large number of abnormal plasma cells accumulating and being deposited in these organs. This is more common in primary than in secondary PCL.

**How is PCL diagnosed?**

PCL is diagnosed by the number of abnormal plasma cells in the blood. A diagnosis is confirmed when there are more than 2 million abnormal plasma cells per millilitre of blood, or when abnormal plasma cells make up more than 20% of the total number of white blood cells present in the blood.

**How is PCL treated and managed?**

Current treatments for primary PCL are the same as those used in myeloma and include drugs such as thalidomide, Velcade® (bortezomib) and Revlimid® (lenalidomide). High-dose therapy and stem cell transplantation is generally offered to younger and/or fitter patients.

Most secondary PCL patients will have already had several anti-myeloma treatments and some patients may have become refractory (resistant) to them. For these patients, more intensive treatments using combinations of chemotherapy drugs including cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, vincristine, etoposide and cisplatin, together with the steroids dexamethasone or prednisolone, may be considered.

Supportive treatment is important to help prevent or reduce the symptoms and complications of PCL. These may include pain-killers, blood transfusions and antibiotics.
The future

It is hoped the development of novel treatments for myeloma will also be of benefit to PCL patients. New drugs such as Kyprolis® (carfilzomib) and Imnovid® (pomalidomide) have been shown to be effective in myeloma patients who no longer respond to Velcade and Revlimid and could therefore also provide new treatment options for PCL patients.

About this Infosheet

The information in this Infosheet is not meant to replace the advice of your medical team. They are the people to ask if you have questions about your individual situation. All Myeloma UK publications are extensively reviewed by patients and healthcare professionals prior to publication.

Other information available from Myeloma UK

Myeloma UK has a range of Essential Guides, Infoguides and Infosheets available covering many areas of myeloma, its treatment and management. To order your free copies call our Myeloma Infoline on 0800 980 3332. This information is also available on our website at www.myeloma.org.uk

To talk to one of our Myeloma Information Specialists about any aspect of myeloma, call the Myeloma Infoline on 0800 980 3332. The Myeloma Infoline is open from Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm and is free to phone from anywhere in the UK and Ireland. From outside the UK and Ireland, call +44 (0)131 557 9988 (charged at normal rate). Information and support about myeloma is also available around the clock at www.myeloma.org.uk

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Updated: August 2014