Leukemia

Alice,

I have a friend who is diagnosed with leukemia. I would like to know what it is and what the survival rate for leukemia is.

? Good friend

Answer

Dear Good friend,

Good on you for wanting to learn more about what is happening with your friend! Leukemia is a general term for several types of cancers characterized by a proliferation of disorganized white blood cells in the bone marrow. The cancerous cells uncontrollably divide until there are billions of copies of this abnormal cell (crowding out the non-cancerous cells). Diagnosis of all forms of leukemia is determined through some combination of a physical exam, blood tests, analysis of chromosomes, and bone marrow biopsy. The survival rate of those diagnosed with leukemia really depends on the type they are diagnosed with (more on this later).

Good friend, you don’t mention what type of leukemia your friend has, but it may help to know that there are four major types of leukemia (there are also other, rarer types of leukemia; you may want to check out the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society for more detailed information on these other types). The major types are classified first by how rapidly the disease progresses and second by which type of white blood cell is affected. In acute leukemia, the abnormal cells are immature blood cells, called blasts, that don’t work properly and multiply rapidly. The disease progresses very quickly, therefore treatment is typically fast and aggressive. In chronic leukemia, the abnormal blood cells are more mature, multiple more slowly, and can still function for a period of time. Disease progression is much slower than in acute (sometimes folks can go years without noticing any symptoms).

On to the blood cells! The two types of white blood cell that can be affected are lymphoid cells (lymphocytes) and myeloid cells. Leukemia of the lymphoid cells is called lymphocytic leukemia and affects cells that form the lymphatic tissues. These tissues are part of the immune system throughout the body. Leukemia of the myeloid cells is known as myelogenous leukemia. This type involves cells that develop into red and white blood cells and platelet-producing cells.

Now it’s time to pair the speed of progression and the cells together that comprise the four
main types. Each type of leukemia has a different population that it typically affects. Additionally, there are different five-year survival rates for each type:

- **Acute myelogenous leukemia (AML)** is the most common overall and is found most often in adults. However, it may sometimes impact children. The five year survival rate is about 25 percent overall and 66 percent for children under the age of 15.
- **Acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL)** is the most common type in children. The five year survival rate is around 70 percent overall, but 92 percent for those younger than 15 years of age.
- **Chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML)** is usually seen in adults. The five year survival rate is about 60 percent.
- **Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL)** is almost always found in adults. The five year survival rate is about 84 percent.

Symptoms vary depending on the type of leukemia, but more common symptoms can include:

- Weight loss without trying
- Sweating excessively, especially at night
- Fatigue
- Recurrent nosebleeds
- Enlarged lymph nodes, liver, or spleen
- Bruising or bleeding easily
- Bone pain
- Frequent infections

When it comes to treatments, there are several different treatment options available. They can include chemotherapy, medications that target the cancer cells, biological therapy, radiation therapy, and stem cell or bone marrow transplants. The treatments used depend on the type of leukemia, how far the disease has progressed, and the age and health of the patient. Your friend will be able to work with her/his health care provider to decide on the best course of action. But, there's something you can do during this time: social support may also be a vital component of your friend's treatment and recovery. Simply being there and listening to their concerns, fears, and anything else they want to share can be a HUGE help!

If you want even more information, you might consider talking with your own health care provider, talking with your friend, or checking out another great resource? the National Cancer Institute [3].

Alice!
Category: Aches, Pains & Other Ailments [4]

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- Friend's mother has cancer? What should I say or do? [6]
- All about bone marrow donation [7]
- Unexplained bruises [8]
- Coping with recovery after cancer treatments [9]