

What is Waldenstrom's Macroglobulinemia?

This is a type of cancer. Cancer occurs when the cells in your body become abnormal and grow out of control. In Waldenstrom's, the plasma cells are affected.

Plasma cells are a type of white blood cell. They help protect the body from infection and disease by making special proteins called antibodies or immunoglobulins. Antibodies attach themselves to foreign substances to fight infection or disease. In Waldenstrom's, too many plasma cells are made in the bone marrow which results in the antibodies being made in an abnormal way.

These problems may occur:

- Your blood may become thicker than normal. This makes it hard for the blood to flow in the small blood vessels of the brain and eyes.
- The abnormal plasma cells crowd out the healthy cells in the bone marrow. This causes a decrease in the number of red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets. Fewer red blood cells cause anemia. The decrease in white blood cells increases your risk of infection. Fewer platelets increase your risk of bleeding and bruising.

Symptoms

At first, you may not have any signs of your disease. Symptoms usually begin gradually.

Early signs are:

- dizziness
- shortness of breath
- sleepiness
- less energy, weakness

Later signs can include:

- weight loss
- blurred vision
- headaches
- bleeding from the nose or gums

Looking for more information on this topic?

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazine articles and online health information.
For a list of public libraries in Nova Scotia go to <http://publiclibraries.ns.ca>

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How is Waldenstrom's diagnosed?

Your doctor will examine your blood and bone marrow under a microscope. Please read the pamphlet **Bone Marrow Test**.

Treatment

Waldenstrom's is only treated when you have symptoms. In some cases, this may not be for a few years. Your doctor will carefully assess your medical history, general health and the extent of your disease before recommending treatment. Treatment is very specific for each person.

Chemotherapy and/or immunotherapy may be treatment options for you. We have pamphlets that describe the medications and chemotherapy/immunotherapy in general. Your nurse will give you these when your treatment is started.

During the first few months of treatment, the abnormal cells usually decrease in number at a rapid rate, and a remission may occur. A remission is usually temporary and during this time, there is a return to good health. Your symptoms will disappear and abnormal cells are no longer found in the bone marrow. Your doctor will do blood tests and a bone marrow test to find out the amount of disease present.

Your doctor may recommend **plasmapheresis**. This is done to treat the symptoms related to the slowing of the blood in your vessels, (due to the thickness). Plasmapheresis removes the abnormal protein from your blood. You will be connected to a machine with a needle placed in each of your arms – blood flows out through one needle, through the machine to remove the abnormal antibodies and then is returned through the other needle.

Caring for yourself

Allow yourself and your family time to adjust to the diagnosis. Many people find it helpful to discuss their feelings, fears, or concerns with their family, a health professional or someone who has gone through a similar experience. Your doctor and/or nurse are here to listen, answer your questions and help you live with this disease.

If you feel tired or short of breath, rest. Allow yourself more time to do everyday tasks and have others help with housework and making meals. Even though you are tired, it

is important that you exercise (such as taking a short walk everyday). Your nurse can give you information on managing fatigue.

Protect yourself from infection by avoiding people with cold or flu symptoms. Talk to your doctor about getting the flu vaccine every year for you and all household members. Your doctor may also suggest you receive a vaccine to prevent pneumonia, Pneumovax.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor if you have new symptoms or your symptoms increase.

Go to the nearest Emergency Department right away if you have:

- severe nausea
- excessive thirst
- drowsiness
- confusion
- a temperature greater than 38°C (100.4°F)
- chills



How can I learn more?

The **Canadian Cancer Society, Cancer Information Service (CIS)** toll free number is 1-888-939-3333. Trained Cancer Information Specialists can discuss the latest treatment options for your disease and tell you about support services in your area. They can also give you good Internet sites where you can seek more information or send you written information. This service is available in French and English.

The **International Waldenstrom's Macroglobulinemia Foundation** is a non-profit organization that supports patients with this disease as well as promoting research into this disease.

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