

## What Is Leukemia?

Cancer occurs when cells in the body begin changing in ways that aren't normal. Cancer that starts in blood cells is called leukemia.

### Understanding the Blood

Blood is made up of cells and fluid. The body constantly replaces old blood cells with new ones to keep the blood healthy. New blood cells are made in the bone marrow (the spongy substance inside bones). One type of blood cells is the **white blood cells**, which help the body fight off infections and disease.

### When Leukemia Forms

Leukemia is cancer of the white blood cells. When leukemia occurs, the body produces many abnormal white blood cells (**blasts**) that aren't able to do the work that normal white blood cells do. More abnormal than normal cells are made, leaving the blood unable to do its work.

There are four major types of leukemias:

- Leukemia can be **myelogenous** or **lymphocytic**. These terms refer to the type of cell that the cancer starts in.
- Leukemia can be **acute** or **chronic**.

Acute leukemias get worse very quickly. Chronic leukemias get worse gradually.

### Treatment Options for Leukemia

You and your healthcare provider will discuss a treatment plan that's best for your needs.

Treatment options may include:

- Chemotherapy, which uses strong medications to kill cancer cells.
- Immunotherapy, which strengthens the body's own immune system to help fight cancer.
- A bone marrow or peripheral stem cell transplant, which removes the tissues or cells that make blood cells and replaces them with healthy tissues or cells.

