

fact sheet

Multiple Myeloma: Coping with Side Effects of Targeted Treatments

Multiple myeloma can be treated in several ways.

- Chemotherapy (drugs that kill cancer cells)
- Steroids (drugs that reduce damage to body tissues)
- Stem cell transplant (an infusion of healthy blood-forming cells, also called a bone marrow transplant)

Multiple myeloma can also now be treated with new drugs, known as "targeted treatments" because they target substances in cancer cells that help the cancer grow. Targeted drugs used to treat multiple myeloma include:

- Velcade (bortezomib)
- Thalomid (thalidomide)
- Revlimid (lenalidomide)
- Bisphosphanates (a class of drugs that prevents the loss of bone mass)



These drugs have dramatically improved the outlook for people with multiple myeloma. Like all drugs, though, targeted treatments have side effects. Often these side effects can be relieved by medication. You can also take other steps to cope with them.

Peripheral neuropathy Tingling, burning, numbness, or weakness in the fingers and toes are the most common symptoms of this side effect. These symptoms are caused by nerve damage. Medication may help. Also try these coping tips:

- Take care not to fall. Move rugs out of the way so you don't trip. Put a rubber mat in the bath tub. Wear sturdy shoes and use a cane to help you walk.
- Avoid burns. Use pot holders in the kitchen to protect your hands. Before showering, ask someone to check that the water isn't too hot.

Blood clots A blood clot happens when red blood cells clump up inside a vein, stopping the blood from flowing. Clots most commonly occur in the legs. To prevent blood clots, your doctor may prescribe a blood-thinning drug. These self-help tips may also help:

- After illness or surgery, get out of bed and move around as soon as you can.
- Try not to sit for long periods. Every hour or so, get up and take a short walk.
- If you must stay seated, try stretching your calf muscles by lifting your heels, then your toes.

Low white blood cell counts Cancer treatment can stop the immune system from making white blood cells, your body's defense against infection. A low white blood cell count increases your risk for getting an infection. Bacterial infections can be treated with antibiotics. To reduce your risk of infection, your doctor may prescribe a drug that helps new white blood cells grow more quickly. Common drugs used are neupogen and newlasta. Also try these tips:

- Always keep your hands clean. Wash them often with soap and water.
- Stay away from crowds and from people who are sick or have colds.
- Be careful not to get cuts in your skin.

Constipation Constipation means having bowel movements that are painful, hard to pass, or less frequent than is normal for you. Laxatives (drugs that stimulate the bowels to move) may help. Don't use over-the-counter treatments without talking to your doctor first. Also try these self-help tips:

- Add high-fiber foods (fruit, vegetables, whole-grain breads and cereals) to your diet.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Aim for eight cups of fluid a day.
- Try to get some exercise every day.

Fatigue Fatigue means feeling tired and weak. In people with multiple myeloma, fatigue is often caused by anemia (a shortage of red blood cells). Your doctor may prescribe drugs that help the body make more red blood cells. Common drugs used are procrit and epogen. Blood transfusions may also help. Try these coping tips:

- Eat high-protein foods (eggs, meat, peanut butter) and foods with iron (spinach, beans). Drink plenty of fluids.
- Try to sleep at least eight hours every night. If you feel tired during the day, take a short nap.
- Gentle exercise, like a short walk every day, may help you feel less tired.

Other side effects Your doctor may recommend treating your multiple myeloma with a targeted drug in combination with chemotherapy or a steroid. Tell your doctor right away if you experience any of these side effects while you're receiving combination therapy:

- Diarrhea
- Loss of appetite
- Mouth sores

Cancer Care Can Help

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with multiple myeloma, contact Cancer Care. We are a national nonprofit organization that provides free, professional support services for anyone affected by cancer. Our services include individual counseling, support groups, education, financial assistance, and referrals to other resources. To learn more, call us at 1-800-813-HOPE (4673) or visit www.cancercare.org.

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