The Basics of Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia

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Understanding Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia

Though many have not heard of it, chronic lymphocytic leukemia is definitely a type of cancer that deserves your time and attention. By understanding this form of cancer, you will be able to recognize the signs and symptoms and therefore take action at an earlier stage to make treatment more effective.

Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia Basics

To best understand the impact of chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL), it is essential to know the basics of leukemia. All leukemias are types of cancers that differ from the others because they originate in the bone marrow, rather than starting in organs like the lungs or breasts.

In leukemia, the cancer takes control of these blood-forming cells in the bone marrow and causes it to grow and develop in abnormal ways. The leukemia cells grow out of control and never die off when they should, which leads to an excess of dysfunctional cells.

With enough growth, these cancer cells begin to move from the bone marrow and make their way into the bloodstream. Once in the blood, they then travel throughout the body, preventing other cells from operating as desired.

CLL is a form of leukemia that is both chronic and lymphocytic. Chronic leukemias involve cells that do not mature fully and live for longer periods. This long survival results in a buildup of cancer cells, which pushes out all of the healthy cells. Because of this, chronic leukemias are also slow to develop and can take many years for symptoms to show.

Lymphocytic leukemias, sometimes called lymphoid or lymphoblastic, start in cells that become white blood cells. Lymphomas, another form of cancer, also begin in these cells, but they are different from lymphocytic leukemias because they target the lymph nodes instead of bone marrow.

The Common Signs and Symptoms of Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia

People who are aware of the common symptoms of CLL are in a better position to notice the condition early. Unfortunately, the most common symptom of CLL is having no symptoms at all.

Because chronic leukemia grows so slowly in the body, the person may have cancer for years without ever feeling the effects. Often, a routine blood test is the way many people discover the presence of CLL.

If the cancer is more developed, it will create noticeable symptoms like:

- Pain and swelling of the lymph nodes, especially the ones in the neck, underarm, stomach, and groin

- Feeling more tired and fatigued during the day
- Experiencing pain or a feeling of being full under the rib cage
- Frequent and unexplained fevers and infections
- Losing significant amounts of weight without dieting

If you or someone you care about is exhibiting any signs of CLL, book an appointment with your doctor immediately.

Testing for CLL

When a doctor is testing for CLL, they use a variety of measures that inspect the person's blood, bone marrow and lymph nodes. For a proper diagnosis, experts will use:

- A complete analysis of medical history and physical
- A complete blood count (CBC) laboratory test
- A variety of lab tests that inspect antibodies, genes and chromosomes
- Bone marrow aspiration and biopsy

In many situations, the CBC blood work will indicate a possible problem, and the bone marrow biopsy confirms the diagnosis. Of course, every person's experience is different and following the recommendations of the treatment team is essential.

The Two Types of Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia

Although there are many versions of CLL, there are two that experts find more often. The most common forms of CLL are:

- A very slow-growing variation that takes a long time to present symptoms
- A variety that grows much faster and causes more serious consequences in a short amount of time

Certainly, there is no "good kind" of CLL, but it is crucial for the treatment team to accurately identify the type of CLL a person has. With a proper diagnosis, there is a better chance of effective treatment.

CLL Treatment Options

Based on the severity and the stage of cancer, there are five main treatments for CLL. They include:

- Watchful waiting: noting the current status of the condition and waiting to offer treatments until symptoms progress
- Radiation: the use of high-powered x-rays and other forms of radiation to kill cancer cells
- Chemotherapy: the use of medications that slow the growth of cancer cells or kill them completely
- Surgery: going into the body to remove any masses that have developed during the cancer's progression
- Targeted therapies: attack specific cancer cells by stopping their ability to grow and making them more susceptible to other treatments

At times, doctors will use these treatments individually to combat the CLL. Other times, the treatment team will employ multiple options simultaneously to get the best results.

CLL is a serious form of cancer, but early detection and diligent treatment can manage the condition and control its symptoms.