

## About Myeloma

### What is Myeloma?

Myeloma is a type of cancer that affects white blood cells known as plasma cells. Plasma cells are found in the bone marrow and are responsible for protecting the body against viruses and infections.

In myeloma, the body produces unneeded plasma cells and these multiply rapidly, disrupting the immune system and displacing healthy bone marrow.

The myeloma cells collect in the bone marrow and in the hard, outer part of bones. Sometimes they collect in only one bone and form a single mass (tumour), but most often they collect in many bones, forming many tumours. When this happens, the cancer is known as multiple myeloma.

### Symptoms

The most common symptom associated with myeloma is bone pain, frequently in the back and ribs. Other symptoms include excessive tiredness, thirst, exhaustion, bruising, nosebleeds, hazy vision, headache and a neurological symptoms such as pain and numbness.

Myeloma can be effectively treated but it cannot yet be cured and average life expectancy for a patient living with myeloma is between 3-5 years.<sup>1</sup>

### Scale of the Problem

Myeloma is one of the fastest growing cancers in the Western world. It has seen an increase in recorded cases of over 100% in the last 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

In 2002 there were over 31,000 cases of myeloma in Europe with approximately 21,000 deaths recorded<sup>3</sup>. It is the second most common form of bone marrow cancer, yet public recognition and awareness of the disease remains worryingly low.

Originally considered an older person's disease, the incidence of Myeloma is now increasing in the young, with 10-15% of patients now under the age of 50.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Office of National Statistics, UK, 1999

<sup>2</sup> [www.info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerstats/multiplemyelome/incidence](http://www.info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerstats/multiplemyelome/incidence)

<sup>3</sup> [www.depdb.iarc.fr/globocan](http://www.depdb.iarc.fr/globocan)

<sup>4</sup> [www.info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerstats/multiplemyelome/incidence](http://www.info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerstats/multiplemyelome/incidence)

## **Causes**

Although the causes of myeloma are unknown, some experts believe that the disease is caused by environmental pollutants, such as pesticides, atomic radiation and petroleum products

## **Treatment**

It is impossible to predict exactly what treatment a myeloma patient will receive throughout the course of their disease, as it is a very individual and complex disease, requiring treatments to be highly tailored. However, the mainstay of initial treatment for myeloma is generally considered to be conventional chemotherapy alone or high dose chemotherapy and autologous stem cell transplantation. Maintenance treatment may be used after chemotherapy or stem cell transplantation to try to prolong the period of response.

In addition, several new drugs have emerged in recent years that target myeloma cells in a different way and are providing real hope to extending the survival of myeloma patients. These include bortezomib, lenalidomide and thalidomide.

## **Further information:**

MYELOMA EURONET Website: [www.myeloma-euronet.org](http://www.myeloma-euronet.org)

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