Hairy cell leukaemia (HCL)

What is HCL?

Hairy cell leukaemia (HCL) is a slow-growing type of blood cancer. It affects white blood cells called lymphocytes. In HCL, these cells don't develop normally. It's called hairy cell leukaemia because, under a microscope, the cancer cells look hairy.

We do not know the exact cause of HCL. It is not due to something you did or did not do.

HCL is rare. Around 230 people are diagnosed with HCL in the UK each year.

Symptoms of HCL

At first, HCL is harmless, but hairy cells can gradually build up in your blood, bone marrow, and spleen. This can stop your bone marrow from making enough healthy blood cells and cause your spleen to swell.

You may get symptoms such as:

- Tiredness, dizziness, or breathlessness
- Frequent or long-lasting infections
- Unexplained bruising or bleeding, like nosebleeds and bleeding gums
- A bloated tummy
- Feeling full quickly
- Losing your appetite

HCL is diagnosed using blood tests and bone marrow tests. You may also have a scan to check your spleen, liver and lymph nodes.

With treatment, HCL is **not** life-threatening, and you can get on with your life.

Treating and monitoring HCL

Most people with HCL need treatment soon after diagnosis.

Treatments for HCL are very effective. They aim to control HCL rather than cure it, so you may need more than one course of treatment in your lifetime.

If you don't have symptoms, you may not need treatment straight away. You may have regular check-ups and monitor your symptoms instead. This is called active monitoring.

If you need treatment, you usually have chemotherapy. The main chemotherapy medicines for HCL are cladribine and pentostatin. You have either one or the other. You have them as an injection or through a drip.

An antibody therapy called rituximab is another option. You have this medicine through a drip. You may have rituximab alongside chemotherapy or on its own.

You may need support to help manage symptoms of HCL or side effects of treatment, like fatigue.

You're more likely to get infections and find it harder to get rid of them when you have HCL or treatment for it. Talk to your haematology team about steps you can take to prevent infections and live well with HCL.

Need support or more information?

- Scan the QR code or visit **leukaemiacare.org.uk**
- Call our freephone helpline on **08088 010 444**
- Send a WhatsApp to **07500 068065**
- Email **support@leukaemiacare.org.uk**

This information is aimed at people in the UK. We do our best to make sure it is accurate and up to date but it should not replace advice or guidance from your health professional. If you have any feedback or you'd like a list of our sources, please email information@leukaemiacare.org.uk.

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