

Spotting Leukaemia in the 65+ community

Leukaemia can be hard to spot because the signs and symptoms are common to other unrelated illnesses. In addition, people 65 and over may have additional complex health needs, making it harder to distinguish potential cancer signs and symptoms from other health issues. Knowing what to look out for could help you spot leukaemia earlier.

How to Spot Leukaemia

Most patients experience symptoms before their diagnosis; however, very few people expect or suspect they may have cancer. In turn, many end up waiting over a month before going to see their GP.

So, how can you help to Spot leukaemia?

The most common symptoms in 65+ are:

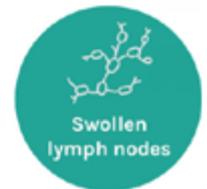
1. Fatigue
2. Bruising or bleeding
3. Swollen lymph nodes
4. Feeling weak or breathless
5. Fever
6. Weight loss



Fatigue



Bruising or bleeding



Swollen lymph nodes



Feeling weak or breathless



Fever



Weight loss

What is leukaemia?

Leukaemia is a cancer that starts in blood-forming tissue, usually the bone marrow. It leads to the over-production of abnormal white blood cells, the part of the immune system which defends the body against infection. Over 9,500 people are diagnosed with leukaemia in the UK every year.

There are many different types of leukaemia, but the four most common are:

- **Acute myeloid leukaemia (AML)** - Rapidly developing, affects myeloid cells (granulocytes)
- **Chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML)** - Slowly developing, affects myeloid cells (granulocytes)
- **Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL)** - Rapidly developing, affects lymphocytes.
- **Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL)** - Slowly developing, affects lymphocytes.



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Acute leukaemia progresses rapidly unless effectively treated, but it can sometimes be cured with standard treatments, such as bone marrow transplants. Chronic leukaemia progresses slowly, and although it is not usually possible to cure chronic leukaemia with standard treatments, it can be treated and managed as a long-term condition.

Isn't leukaemia a child's disease/illness?

Contrary to popular perception, leukaemia is not just a childhood disease.

Leukaemia incidence correlates strongly with increasing age, with 2 in 3 leukaemia cases diagnosed in people 65 and over and 4 in 5 leukaemia deaths occurring in people aged 65 or over. It's not just a childhood disease, so over 65's and their carers, friends, and loved ones should be aware of the signs and symptoms.

Age and Inequalities

Research from sources such as Public Health England, EURO CARE, Cancer Research UK and Macmillan Cancer Support has extensively shown that cancer survival worsens with increasing age:

- Older patients are twice as likely to die from leukaemia than younger patients
- 740 deaths of people over the age of 65 could be prevented each year if UK survival rates for leukaemia matched the best in Europe
- In chronic types of Leukaemia, rates of emergency presentation increase with age

Why is it important to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of leukaemia within the 65+ community?

In a study carried out by Leukaemia Care, GPs were twice as likely to refer patients over the age of 65 as a non-urgent referral (i.e. cancer was not suspected). Older people may have other complex health needs, making it harder to distinguish potential cancer signs and symptoms from other health issues and investigate and refer appropriately.

Additionally, the non-specific nature of leukaemia symptoms means that the symptoms often fail to raise suspicion in both the public and the primary healthcare sector. So, it is important to know the signs and symptoms of leukaemia in the 65+ community to lower the rates of emergency diagnosis and improve mortality rates.



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When should I be concerned?

It is important to contact your GP if you or a loved one are displaying more than one of the above symptoms. Since the symptoms are common to other unrelated illnesses, it is unlikely that leukaemia will be the cause. However, it is for this exact reason that leukaemia can be hard to spot, as the signs and symptoms are easily misdiagnosed. Therefore, contacting your GP earlier can be crucial for either ruling leukaemia out or getting an early diagnosis.

Who is Leukaemia Care?

Leukaemia Care is a national blood cancer support charity. We are dedicated to ensuring that anyone affected by blood cancer receives the right information, advice and support. Our mission is to improve lives through earlier diagnosis, access to effective treatments, information and support.

Find out more about how to Spot Leukaemia [here](#).

OPAAL's Advocacy Checklist

The Advocacy Checklist is a simple and effective means of ensuring that older people are recognised as the experts on themselves and what best reflects their needs and wants. It's a clear way of demonstrating that organisations will help older people speak up, and be involved in the decisions about how they are going to best enjoy life as we all age together.

Find out more about the Advocacy Checklist here: www.opaal.org.uk



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