

# Multiple myeloma

## What is multiple myeloma?

Multiple myeloma is a cancer of the plasma cells.

Large numbers of abnormal plasma cells are made, especially in the bone marrow. The abnormal plasma cells crowd out the normal bone marrow so that it cannot make enough normal blood cells. Myeloma also weakens the immune system and the level of normal antibodies is reduced.

The abnormal plasma cells make an antibody known as M-band or paraprotein. This paraprotein can be detected in the blood of most people with multiple myeloma.

Part of this antibody can be found in the urine of some patients, where it is called Bence Jones protein. If a large amount of this protein is present, it can damage the kidneys as it passes through them into the urine.

From the bone marrow, myeloma may spread into the bone itself. It can soften the bones (osteoporosis) or destroy areas of bone (lytic lesions). When bone is damaged like this, it releases calcium into the blood and can cause a high level of calcium in the blood, called hypercalcaemia.

## How common is it?

Multiple myeloma is not a common illness. In Tasmania, about 30 people develop the illness each year.

Multiple myeloma usually occurs in older people. Most people who develop the disease are aged 60 years and over. While it is rare before the age of 40, recent figures show multiple myeloma is becoming more common in both younger adults and the elderly. The reason for the increase is not known.

## What causes multiple myeloma?

The cause of multiple myeloma is unknown.

However, it is more common in

- older people
- men
- certain racial groups (such as African-Americans).

Certain chemicals (e.g. dioxins), radiation and viruses have been linked to myeloma but they have not been proven to cause it.

Myeloma is not hereditary, which means it does not run in families. It is extremely rare for more than one person in a family to be affected.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding Multiple Myeloma* on [www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof\\_patient.php](http://www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php)

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