

Acute leukaemia

What is acute leukaemia?

Acute leukaemia develops when your white cells grow out of control and continue to divide but do not mature. Because they are immature they do not carry out the normal work of white cells, increasing the risk of infection.

The bone marrow fills with immature white cells (blast cells or lymphoblasts) leaving little room for healthy red cells and platelets to be produced.

Types of acute leukaemia

There are two types of acute leukaemia depending on what type of white blood cell is involved:

- acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL)
- acute myeloid leukaemia (AML)

ALL is a leukaemia involving immature lymphocytes called lymphoblasts. It is also sometimes known as acute lymphatic leukaemia.

AML is a leukaemia involving immature myeloid cells called myeloidblasts.

What causes acute leukaemia?

The cause of acute leukaemia is unknown, but some factors increase the chance of developing the illness, including:

- exposure to x-rays and other forms of radiation
- certain chemicals, such as benzene
- virus infections.

How common is it?

Just over half of the cases of leukaemia diagnosed are acute leukaemia.

Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia is the only form of leukaemia that occurs more frequently in children than adults. It is most common in children aged between one and four. It becomes less common after 10 years of age but increases again after the age of 40.

Acute myeloid leukaemia is more common in adults and rare in children.

Both types are slightly more common in males than in females.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding acute leukaemia* on www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php

Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20