

## FACT SHEET LEUKAEMIAS

### What are leukaemias?

- Leukaemias are cancers that affect the bone marrow, where blood cells are made.
- Leukaemia occurs when abnormal white blood cells multiply rapidly and spill into the blood stream. Left untreated, these leukaemia cells crowd out the healthy cells, leaving the body starved of oxygen, with little immunity to disease or infection and unable to 'plug' wounds in the skin and blood vessels.
- There are four main types of leukaemia:
  - Acute myeloid leukaemia
  - Acute lymphoblastic leukaemia
  - Chronic myeloid leukaemia
  - Chronic lymphocytic leukaemia
- *Acute leukaemias* develop quickly and need to be treated urgently.
- *Chronic leukaemias* develop more slowly and may not need to be treated for some time after diagnosis.

### Incidence:

- Leukaemia can develop in anyone, of any age, at any time.
- In 2009, approximately 3,100 Australians are projected to have been diagnosed with leukaemia; the equivalent of 8 people every day<sup>i</sup>.
- Approximately 1,500 Australians will die of leukaemias every year; the equivalent of almost 4 people every day<sup>ii</sup>.
- In 2010, it is projected there will be 3,138 Australians diagnosed with leukaemia each year (an increase of 21.5% since 2002)<sup>i</sup>
- Leukaemia is the most common form of childhood cancer yet more than 90% of Australians diagnosed with leukaemia are adults (the majority over 50 years old).
- The majority of children with leukaemia have acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL).
- Research has made a difference in our lifetime. In the last 20 years, survival rates for children with leukaemia has increased significantly, so that most children now survive (80% survive ten years).

### Causes:

- Factors that may affect leukaemia's development are not clear but may include a person's genetic history, exposure to intense radiation and certain chemicals such as benzene and viruses like the Human T-Cell leukaemia virus.

### Treatment:

- Leukaemias often develop with little warning, requiring immediate and intensive treatment. Patients with acute leukaemia typically begin treatment within 24 hours of diagnosis.

- Treatments can include chemotherapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapies, bone marrow or stem cell transplantation or a combination of these.
- Treatment periods can be very long, sometimes for many years, however on average treatment lasts eight months. For Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia treatment will be at least two years.

### **The impact:**

- Leukaemia can develop in anyone, of any age, at any time.
- Diagnosis with an aggressive leukaemia can turn lives upside down overnight. Families from rural or regional Australia often need to quickly relocate to major cities to be closer to treatment centres. This is usually for extended periods of time.
- Relocation is particularly traumatic as it often occurs after diagnosis, resulting in patients and families adjusting to their new circumstances without the benefit of established local support networks. Combined with costly medical bills and loss of income, many families find themselves in financially crippling circumstances whilst coping with the shock and emotional turmoil associated with the diagnosis.
- On average, treatment of haematological cancers lasts for eight months but can continue for years.

**For further information or support, please contact the Foundation:  
1800 620 420 or [www.leukaemia.org.au](http://www.leukaemia.org.au)**

*Last updated October 2008*

---

<sup>i</sup> Cancer incidence projections for Australia 2002-2011 – AIHW (2005)

<sup>ii</sup> 'Cancer Survival and Prevalence in Australia – Cancers diagnosed from 1982 to 2004' – AIHW and AACR (2008)