Blood clots

Symptoms and complications Infosheet

This Infosheet explains what blood clots are and why myeloma patients are at higher risk of them. It also describes what the symptoms of a blood clot are, how they can be prevented and treated, and tips for self-management.

What is a blood clot?

Blood clotting is the natural process that stops us bleeding excessively from a cut or wound. However, sometimes a blood clot forms inside a vein. This is called a venous thromboembolic event (VTE).

The most common place for a blood clot is in the veins of a leg (or sometimes an arm), which is called a deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Part of a clot can break away and travel to the lungs, which is known as a pulmonary embolism.

What causes blood clots in a vein?

A blood clot in a vein happens when the normal clotting process does not work properly. This can be due to:

- Changes in the contents of the blood
- Damage to, or narrowing of, the blood vessels
- Changes in normal blood flow

Your chance of getting a blood clot is higher if you:

- Are overweight
- Smoke
- Are on some treatments, including the contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- Are unable to move around much (for example if you are in hospital or ill in bed)
- Are pregnant
- Have had a blood clot in the past
- Have certain medical conditions, such as diabetes or heart disease

All cancer patients are at increased risk of blood clots but the risk varies by individual. Myeloma patients are also at higher risk than patients with some other cancers.

Blood clots in the veins and lungs are potentially serious, so it is important to know the symptoms and how to reduce your risk of having a blood clot.

What are the symptoms of a blood clot in a vein or lungs?

The most common symptoms of a blood clot in a vein include:

- Throbbing or cramping pain in your leg or arm
- Swelling and heaviness in your leg or arm
- Redness and/or warmth on the skin around the painful area

Call your healthcare team, GP or 111 immediately if you experience any symptoms of a blood clot in a vein.

The symptoms of a blood clot in the lungs include:

- Sudden breathlessness or difficulty breathing
- Pain in your chest or upper back
- Coughing up blood
- Fast heartbeat

Call 999 immediately if you have the symptoms of a blood clot in the lungs. This is an medical emergency and requires urgent treatment.

Why is the risk of a blood clot increased in myeloma?

Myeloma patients are thought to be more likely to develop blood clots because of:

- The myeloma itself, which can change the blood and make it thicker and more likely to clot
- The specific treatments and treatment combinations used for myeloma

Other factors that can add to the risk in myeloma patients include:

- Inactivity – for example if you are feeling very unwell, are in pain, or are in hospital
- Having surgery
- Having treatments administered through a central vein – blood can sometimes clot in the tube

Some myeloma treatments increase the risk of blood clots when used in combination with high-dose steroids (dexamethasone or prednisolone) or chemotherapy. These include immunomodulatory drugs (sometimes called IMiDs) such as:

- Thalidomide
- Lenalidomide (Revlimid®)
- Pomalidomide (Imnovid®)

Other treatments that may make blood clots more likely are carfilzomib (Kyprolis®), and a treatment called erythropoeitin (EPO).

Your healthcare team will explain if your treatments carry an increased risk of blood clots. They will make sure that the benefits of any treatments outweigh the risks and can discuss this with you.

For more information see the **Myeloma Treatment Guides** from Myeloma UK

How are blood clots prevented and treated?

You will be assessed for your risk of developing a blood clot regularly, and particularly:

- When you are first diagnosed with myeloma
- Before the start of treatments
- At relapse
- If you go into hospital for planned treatment or emergency care

In some cases, such as with specific myeloma treatments, you will be given treatments to help prevent clots, called anticoagulants. Anticoagulants are sometimes called “blood thinning medicines”.

They don't actually thin the blood, but they work in different ways to make blood clots less likely.

Anticoagulants you may be given include:

- Warfarin – given as a tablet (orally)
- Newer types of anticoagulants such as apixaban (Eliquis®) or rivaroxaban (Xarelto®) – given orally
- Low molecular weight heparin (LMWH) – given into a vein (intravenous) or under the skin (subcutaneous)

You may also be given 'mechanical' treatments, such as stockings or inflatable sleeves, to improve your circulation.

Despite preventive treatment, blood clots can still occur. Therefore, it is important to be alert to possible symptoms and report them straight away.

If you have a blood clot or your healthcare team suspects one, you will be given anticoagulants. These will help to stop the clot from getting bigger or new clots from forming, while your body gradually breaks down the clot and reabsorbs it. The anticoagulants used will depend on your situation, including your risk of side effects such as bleeding.

Side effects of anticoagulants

Because anticoagulants affect blood clotting, they can make you more prone to bleeding.

While you are on anticoagulant treatment, you will have blood tests to check the risk of bleeding.

Bleeding due to anticoagulants can include:

- Nosebleeds and/or bleeding from the gums
- Coughing up or vomiting blood
- Pink or brown urine
- Blood or black colour in your poo
- Unusual bruising
- Any other abnormal bleeding

If you are on anticoagulants, report any symptoms like these to your healthcare team straight away.

Tips for self-management

Although as a myeloma patient your risk of having a blood clot is increased, there are a lot of things you can do to reduce the chance of this happening, and to make sure that if a blood clot does occur it is treated quickly:

- Know the symptoms and report them immediately. If you have symptoms of a clot in the lungs call 999
- Eat a balanced healthy diet and try to lose weight if you are overweight
- Drink plenty of water
- Stop smoking – your healthcare team can support you in doing this
- Stay active and avoid sitting still for long periods if you can – for example, go for regular short walks
- If you can't move around much, try to do simple leg exercises like flexing and straightening your ankles to improve blood flow

If you are on anticoagulant drug treatment:

- Know the possible side effects of anticoagulants including bleeding (see page 4)
- Report any side effects to your healthcare team
- Be careful when brushing your teeth and shaving (use a soft toothbrush and an electric razor)
- Avoid cuts and scratches (for example use gardening gloves)
- It may be helpful to carry an anticoagulant alert card. If you do not have one, you can ask your healthcare team to provide you with one

It is not unusual to feel anxious about having a blood clot. However, following these tips will ensure that you minimise the chance of it happening, and that if a clot does happen it will be treated quickly.

Thrombosis UK (**thrombosisuk.org**) provides a number of resources on preventing blood clots, and supporting your wellbeing if you are worried about how blood clots may affect you.

Key points

- Blood clots can happen in the veins of the legs or arms or in the lungs
- The chance of them happening is increased in cancer patients, and in particular in certain cancers including myeloma
- It is important to know the symptoms and report them straight away (dial 999 if you have symptoms of a blood clot in the lungs)
- You will be monitored and may be given treatments called anticoagulants to prevent blood clots
- Some myeloma treatment combinations significantly increase the risk of blood clots, and you are likely to be given anticoagulants to prevent this happening
- There are steps you can take to reduce your risk of blood clots, including avoiding being too inactive, keeping to a healthy weight and stopping smoking

About this Infosheet

The information in this Infosheet is not meant to replace the advice of your medical team. They are the people to ask if you have questions about your individual situation.

For a list of references used to develop our resources, visit **myeloma.org.uk/references**

We value your feedback about our patient information. For a short online survey go to **myeloma.org.uk/pifeedback** or email comments to **patientinfo@myeloma.org.uk**

Other information available from Myeloma UK

Myeloma UK has a range of publications available covering all areas of myeloma, its treatment and management, and related conditions. Download or order them from **myeloma.org.uk/publications**

To talk to one of our Myeloma Information Specialists about any aspect of myeloma, call our Myeloma Infoline on **0800 980 3332** or **1800 937 773** from Ireland.

The Infoline is open Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm and is free to phone from anywhere in the UK and Ireland.

Information and support about myeloma is also available round the clock at **myeloma.org.uk**

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MyelomaUK

We're here for everything a diagnosis of myeloma brings

Get in touch to find out more about how we can support you

Call the Myeloma Infoline on
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AskTheNurse@myeloma.org.uk

Visit our website at
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