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Five Things to Know About Multiple Myeloma Relapse

This blood cancer affects Black patients twice as often as other populations, making it critical to educate yourself and know your options

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All blood cancers are cause for concern, but for Black adults, multiple myeloma is more common than any other.[1] The disease comes from abnormal, uncontrolled growth of plasma cells in the bone marrow.[2] It can permanently weaken bones and damage organs,[3] increasing the risk of fractures[4] and other illnesses that healthy organs would normally keep at bay.

Though multiple myeloma is treatable, there is currently no cure.[5],[6] Almost all patients will either experience relapse or the disease will become refractory, meaning the cancer doesn't respond to treatment. Here are five important things to know to help you navigate the disease:

1. Symptoms can help you recognize relapse
   If ever there was reason to celebrate, remission is it. But it's important to remember that relapse is likely. In 2016, the median time to relapse after first-line therapy was 26.9 months.[7] That number is going up thanks to new treatment approaches[8] and patients becoming more educated on symptoms that could signal a potential relapse.

   Common signs indicating a potential relapse are back pain, weakness, fatigue, frequent urination and constipation.[9],[10] Just like these symptoms potentially indicated initial diagnosis, they can be a clue that the disease is back. Doctors may also perform check-ups every one to three months,[11] using blood tests, urine tests, bone marrow evaluations or other imaging scans to check for signs of relapse.[12]

2. Treatment options you can explore
   If multiple myeloma relapse occurs, or when the disease becomes refractory to your current treatments, making decisions on a new path forward can be affected by several factors, including previous therapy, rate of relapse, health and any genetic abnormalities which may be present.[13] That's why it's so important to talk openly with your doctor about your health history and lived experience on treatment.

Doctors can tell you about the different treatment options and combinations worth considering. Beyond sharing how well the regimens have been shown to work, they can be good sources of information on how different approaches may affect your life – from potential adverse reactions to how they're administered and how often. You may also do some research on your own, to inform your discussion with your doctor, through trusted sites like the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation, the International Myeloma Society, or the HealthTree Foundation for Multiple Myeloma.

3. Clinical trials can open new treatment doors
   Advances in treatment are improving outcomes for patients experiencing relapse. Clinical trials, a type of research that studies new treatments and evaluates their effects on outcomes in people, offer patients a chance to benefit from those innovations. While 20% of the U.S. population with multiple myeloma is African American, Black patients make up less than 5% of clinical trial participants.[14]

   Increasing the representation of Black participants in clinical trials can help lead to better outcomes for the Black patient community. This is especially vital for those who have relapsed or stopped responding to existing front-line treatments. To find a potential trial for yourself or a loved one, you can use the Clinical Trial Finder from the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation.

4. People are ready and willing to be your support
   It is normal and completely understandable to feel sad if a doctor says your cancer has returned. Process the emotion but try not to let it overshadow your determination or hope for the future. Talk to your doctor, your friends and family. You may even consider finding a support group to meet other patients with multiple myeloma, caregivers, their family members and friends. Building those relationships can help you understand more about the disease.

   After all, we've seen more multiple myeloma treatment innovation in the last 10 years than the previous 100.[15] With new regimen options, increased awareness and stronger support, there's no telling what tomorrow will bring.

5. Communities and companies are coming together to help
   There are many different organizations committed to addressing unmet needs for people living with multiple myeloma. GSK is one of them. Target the Future is a global initiative to increase awareness and equity while targeting disparities in multiple myeloma. Through the Target the Future Think Tank Challenge, GSK is identifying and accelerating solutions to help patients and families of those living with the disease. In its inaugural year, GSK provided a $100,000 grant to the HealthTree Foundation, a non-profit providing education to help facilitate more equitable care to multiple myeloma patients.

   This year, the Think Tank Challenge was focused entirely on targeting disparities in multiple myeloma care. You can learn more about the challenge and the opportunities to get ahead of this disease together by visiting the Target the Future website.

Multiple myeloma is a complex blood cancer that affects the Black community more than other groups.[16] The more we learn about the disease and its symptoms, the better prepared we'll be to face it if it enters or re-enters our lives or the lives of our loved ones. While there's no cure today, the number of treatment options are growing. Every clinical trial, new regimen, and promising combination brings us that much closer to the cancer-free outcomes we collectively want to achieve.

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