

Bone marrow is the soft part in the centre of the major bones in your body. If you cracked a bone open, you would see the bone marrow inside – it looks like a sponge.

Most of your blood cells are made in your bone marrow. New blood cells grow from a **parent cell** (also called a **stem cell**).

People with certain kinds of cancer may need to have:

- A **bone marrow transplant** – this is when you get new bone marrow full of healthy stem cells. The bone marrow may be donated by a relative, or may come from someone else.
- A **stem cell transplant** – this is like a bone marrow transplant, except that you **only** get the stem cells themselves. Your own stem cells may be collected and stored, or they may come from someone else.

### Why is a transplant best for me?

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A bone marrow or stem cell transplant can cure certain kinds of cancer.

Your health care team will explain why a transplant is the best treatment for you.

### How does the transplant work?

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1. Bone marrow or stem cells are taken out of your body or another person's body and stored.
2. You will have high-dose chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy to kill the cancer cells. These treatments will also destroy your body's own bone marrow but it will grow again.
3. To replace your bone marrow, you will be hooked up to a needle that has a tube leading to a plastic bag. This is called an intravenous (IV) infusion. You will need to lie still for an hour or two while the liquid bone marrow or stem cells drips into your body. You will not have an operation to open up your bones to put bone marrow or stem cells in.
4. After one or two weeks, the new bone marrow or stem cells will settle in your body and start to make red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

If the bone marrow or stem cells you get in the transplant are your own (saved and frozen from before), this is called an autologous transplant. If the bone marrow or stem cells are donated by someone who has healthy bone marrow, this is called an allogeneic transplant. Your doctor will decide which kind of transplant is best for you.

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## What are the side effects of a bone marrow or stem cell transplant?

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Bone marrow or stem cell transplants (and the high-dose chemotherapy or radiation therapy that goes with them) can cause side effects. No one can know for sure exactly which side effects you might have.

The most common side effects are:

- feeling very tired (fatigue)
- hair loss
- low blood cell levels, such as anemia or neutropenia (low white cell count)
- feeling like you might throw up (nausea)
- feeling numb or tingling in the hands or feet

- a sore mouth and sore throat
- not wanting to eat
- changes in how you feel about sex
- for women, changes in their period (menstrual cycle)
- diarrhea
- pain

Your health care team will give you more details about the side effects that you might have and how to cope with them.

**Please keep in mind that side effects are not a sign of how well the treatment worked against your cancer.**

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## How can I cope with my cancer and treatment?

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It is normal for you and your family to have many feelings at this time. Talk with your doctor, nurse, or someone else on your health care team about your feelings.

Your doctor and nurse are there to answer your questions and to help you.

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## Questions to ask your health care team

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- Why is a bone marrow or stem cell transplant the best treatment for me?
- What are the benefits and risks of the transplant for me?
- Where will the bone marrow or stem cells come from?
- Can someone in my family donate their bone marrow?
- How and where will the transplant take place?
- Who can be with me during my treatment?
- How long will I be in the hospital?
- How will we know if the treatment worked?
- Will I be able to go to work?
- Can I keep doing the things that I used to do? What should I not do?
- Will the transplant affect whether or not I can have children?
- Can I travel or take a vacation after the transplant?
- What happens after the transplant is over?

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This fact sheet is meant to support the information that your health care team gives you. It is also meant to encourage you to ask questions to your health care team. This fact sheet does **not** replace any information that your healthcare team gives you.

Living Well With Cancer is a partnership among several people living with cancer, health care professionals, people who represent cancer and professional organizations, and Ortho Biotech. The LWWC partnership gratefully acknowledges the input of the QeII Health Sciences Centre in this fact sheet.

Living Well With Cancer Information Centre

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