

Lloyd and Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia

Welcome to the podcast for Chapter 28 of *Understanding Medical-Surgical Nursing*. In this episode, we'll review pathophysiology, signs, symptoms, treatments, and nursing care of one type of leukemia.

Jana's older adult neighbor, Lloyd, was 82 years old when he was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia. Lloyd and his wife Betsy had lived next door for as long as Jana could remember. They were wonderful neighbors. They looked out for Jana and her kids, and they brought her vegetables from their garden. In return, Jana tried to help them as much as she could, especially now that they were slowing down.

A few months ago, Lloyd told Jana that he'd been diagnosed with leukemia—the chronic myelogenous kind, he said. At first he hadn't wanted to worry his wife with the news, but Jana encouraged him to tell her. As a practical nurse, Jana knew it was important that they support each other. They had certainly lived through a lot of “for better or worse” thus far in their life together!

Lloyd said he first went to the doctor with a cold that had hung on way too long. Within a week, it turned into pneumonia, and he landed in the hospital for several days. While he was there, he had some blood tests done, and they found a lot of immature white blood cells in his circulation. Of course, it's common to have a lot of white blood cells with an infection like pneumonia, but apparently the lab tech saw something more, because the doctor came in and said he wanted to do a bone marrow biopsy.

“Let me tell you,” Lloyd later told Jana, “a bone marrow biopsy is not a walk in the park! They stuck a needle right in my breastbone. The doctor had to push really hard to go through the bone. Good thing the nurse gave me a painkiller first. The doc told me they found leukemia cells, and something called a Philadelphia chromosome. And I've never even been there!” Jana chuckled at his joke but put her hand on his arm to show she was concerned for him. She asked what the treatment plan would be. “I'm starting a new pill called Gleevec,” Lloyd said. “I guess it's supposed to kill off the bad cells.”

Jana knew that Lloyd would be at risk for infection, bleeding, and fatigue because of his leukemia but also because of the treatment. Even though Gleevec was one of the newer therapies that targeted cancer cells, it could still cause side effects, including neutropenia. She didn't want to impose, since she was his neighbor and not his nurse, but she was concerned. She started to look for an opportunity to talk to him about preventing complications.

She didn't have to look long. Lloyd and Betsy both seemed to need to talk about the diagnosis, because they showed up at her back door more frequently now, with tomatoes or cucumbers from the garden or even some cookies for the kids. One afternoon after Jana got home from work, they came with some green peppers. Jana invited them in and offered them

some iced tea. She said, “I work at the hospital, and I know a little bit about leukemia. Is it all right if I ask you some questions?”

“Sure,” Lloyd and Betsy said in unison, seeming relieved at the opportunity to talk.

“Well, I’m wondering what your doctor or nurse told you about how to deal with your symptoms, and how to prevent complications,” Jana asked. Lloyd said they watched some videos in the office and had brought home some pamphlets, but there was so much information it was hard to grasp it all. Jana asked if she could see the pamphlets. Betsy went home to get them, and sure enough, it was all the information Jana wanted them to have. But Lloyd had been feeling too fatigued to really pay attention to it.

“Well, let’s start with gardening,” Jana said. “Do you have energy to garden?”

Lloyd said he just liked to get his hands in the dirt sometimes, but that Betsy did most of the hard work now. Jana told them both that until Lloyd’s leukemia was in remission and his white count bounced back, working in dirt could increase his risk of infection. He should wear gloves when gardening and wash his hands really well afterward.

“Just think of all the bacteria in that dirt, and you don’t really have enough healthy white cells right now to fight them off,” she said. “Why don’t I send my kids over to help in the garden for now? They love to play in the dirt! And be sure to wash all fruits and veggies really well or cook them before eating them.”

“Goodness, we had no idea,” Betsy said. “Is there anything else we can do to protect him?”

“You can both wash your hands,” Jana said, “a lot. At the hospital they teach us to sing a verse of ‘Happy Birthday’ while we scrub with lots of soap and warm water. You might try that. When you’re working with food, or if you get your hands dirty, you’ll want to wash them. Especially when you’re out. You wouldn’t believe the germs that gather on public restroom door handles and grocery carts. You might even invest in one of the alcohol-based hand washes to keep in your pocket.”

“We can do that,” said Lloyd. “What else?”

“Well, stay far away from anyone who’s sick, because it would be really easy to catch something. And you also should be really careful about hurting yourself, because if you get a cut or a scratch, you could bleed a lot.”

“I do remember that,” Lloyd said, and he promised to review the pamphlet on signs and symptoms of bleeding, and how to keep himself safe. “But what can I do about this fatigue? I am just so tired all the time! I know I’m 82, but I’d sure like a little energy.”

“That’s kind of hard,” Jana said. “There aren’t any magic treatments for fatigue. Do let your doctor know about it, because there may be some medication you could take to boost your red blood cells, and that might help. But in the meantime, try not to do too much. If you go to the grocery store with Betsy, plan to rest a while when you get home. And let me or the

kids know if you need something done—we're glad to help. And remember. . . this isn't forever. When your red cells recover, you'll have more energy again."

"It's nice having a personal nurse," Lloyd said, smiling. "You know, what I really want to do most is have enough energy to go to my grandson's college graduation next month." He and Jana and Betsy talked further about ways he could conserve energy to meet this goal. When Lloyd and Betsy got up to leave, Lloyd reached out to give Jana a hug, but he held her at arm's length. "Only if you don't have a cold," he said. "My personal nurse tells me I have to avoid people who are sick." Jana laughed and assured him she was fine and gave him a hug.

In this podcast, you reviewed basic leukemia pathophysiology, signs and symptoms, treatments, and nursing care to prevent complications from the disease and treatment.