



Patient Power

Waldenstrom Macroglobulinemia: Symptoms and Treatment

Larry Anderson, Jr., MD, PhD

Associate Professor, Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Hematology/Oncology
UT Southwestern Medical Center

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Dr. Anderson:

Some patients with Waldenstrom's may have smoldering disease that's sort of like a precancer where they have detectable disease in the bone marrow, they have an elevated IgM but no symptoms. And the symptoms that we look for that would require treatment would be anemia, large spleen, something called hyperviscosity. Because this IgM protein is very large, it's five times larger than the normal immunoglobulins from myeloma, for example, and so with the same amount of disease they can have five times more protein levels circulating in their blood, and that high level of protein can cause sludging of the blood, and those patients may have blurry vision or nosebleeds or dizziness. That's called hyperviscosity and that would require urgent treatment.

The patients that have symptoms, we have many different treatment options. If they have just low-level symptoms like anemia and they don't have hyperviscosity, then a lot of times we'll treat them with a monoclonal antibody called rituximab (Rituxan) that targets CD20 on the lymphoplasmacytic cells. If they have more urgent symptoms and need urgent treatment, then we will often combine that with something else.

And also something to be watching out for is when we use rituximab alone in Waldenstrom's patients we can see a flare of the IgM in about half of those patients. So if they have really high levels of IgM at baseline, we don't start out with rituximab therapy. We have to sort of bring those levels down with other treatments. One of the main recommended treatments would be a chemotherapy called bendamustine (Trenda), and then after a cycle or two, once we get those IgM levels down, we'll combine that with the rituximab antibody therapy.

For those patients that don't want chemotherapy like bendamustine, we have several other options actually. We have an oral drug called ibrutinib (Imbruvica) that is a daily pill that the patient would take. And we have an injection of a proteasome inhibitor, bortezomib (Velcade). We have basically several different options and combinations and every patient—it's really a personalized decision between the patient and the doctor as to how much symptoms they're having, what side effects they're willing to risk, what they're not willing to risk.

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