

A Patient's Guide to having a Bone Marrow Test

Consent

It is a legal requirement to have a signed Consent Form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

Identification

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment sheet every time you attend.

This leaflet has been written in collaboration with oncologists, health professionals, patients and carers at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

Our thanks to the staff at UCL for allowing the LMC to adapt their bone marrow information.

If you have difficulty reading this size of print, a version of this leaflet or any of our leaflets can be produced for you in a larger print.

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Contents

Introduction	4
What is bone marrow?	4
Why is a bone marrow test performed?	4
Where is the bone marrow?	4
Who will do the bone marrow test?	5
What will happen when I have this test?	5
What should I expect after the bone marrow test?	6
When will I get the results?	7
Where can I get additional help and support?	8
Mount Vernon Cancer Centre Contacts	9

Introduction

This leaflet is written for patients who are about to have a bone marrow test. We hope it will answer the most commonly asked questions, but if anything in this leaflet is unclear or if you have any further questions, please talk to one of the medical team treating you.

We have provided some contact numbers for you at the end of this leaflet.

What is bone marrow?

Bone marrow is a jelly-like substance that lies in the hollow centre of your bones, and which produces the various cells in your blood.

Why is a bone marrow test performed?

Bone marrow examination is a useful test when blood cells are not being produced in the correct numbers. One example is anaemia, when there is a lack of red cells in the blood.

Some diseases that start outside the bone marrow can also affect the blood cells. The doctor who requested the marrow test will explain the reasons for doing it in your particular case.

Where is the bone marrow?

The most active bone marrow lies in the midline of your body - for example your skull, the bones in your back (vertebrae) and your hip bones. Fortunately these bones

also have the thinnest outer layer of bone (cortex), making it easier to obtain bone marrow samples than in other areas of the body.

Bone marrow samples are generally obtained from the hip bones (iliac crest) or occasionally from the breast bone (sternum). The procedure is generally performed under a local anaesthetic so it is not too painful.

Who will do the bone marrow test?

The bone marrow test is done by a haematology doctor (who specialises in disorders of the blood) and/or a haematology nurse specialist. If you are anxious about the bone marrow procedure please discuss this with the haematologist before the test. He/she can be contacted via the haematology secretary on 01923 844413.

What will happen when I have this test?

The doctor or nurse taking your bone marrow sample will position you on a couch with the lower end of your back exposed. The back end of the hipbone, called the posterior iliac crest, is the area most commonly used.

If you stand with your 'hands on hips' then this area can be felt as a bony lump close to your thumbs.

The skin over the chosen area is cleaned with an antiseptic liquid. Please tell the haematology team beforehand if you are allergic to any of the common antiseptics such as iodine or chlorhexidine.

Local anaesthetic is then injected into the tissues overlying the bone. This takes several minutes to work, so the doctor/

nurse will use this time to prepare the rest of the apparatus needed for the procedure.

As the local anaesthetic is being injected, you will experience a sharp scratch and some stinging. The skin becomes numb and the membrane covering the bone, called the periosteum, is numbed with local anaesthetic.

You may feel the doctor pushing on your back during the test, since we cannot numb the bone completely. You may ask for more local anaesthetic if it is too painful.

Bone marrow samples can be taken in two ways:

1. For a bone marrow aspirate, a few drops of marrow are withdrawn using a needle and a syringe, and smears of this material are made on glass slides that are stained in various ways and examined under the microscope.
2. For a bone marrow trephine biopsy, a small core of bone marrow is obtained, using a larger needle.

Depending on what is being looked for, the doctor may use just one or both of these methods and will talk it through with you. The bone marrow needle used is sterile and will be used for you alone.

What should I expect after the bone marrow test?

The local anaesthetic will wear off in 2 - 3 hours. The site of the marrow test may be sore for a few days. If this occurs, a mild painkiller such as paracetamol can be taken. The site will be covered with a clean dressing, which should be left on overnight.

The underlying bone may be slightly tender for a few weeks if the area is pressed hard. Some bruising around the site may also persist for up to a fortnight, particularly if the count of cells in the blood responsible for clotting (platelets) is low.

If you develop swelling and redness in the days after the test, this can be a sign of infection, particularly if there is also a discharge from the puncture hole. If this happens, you must seek help in case antibiotic treatment is necessary. Contact the haematology team via the haematology secretary or call Ward 10 or Ward 11 (see Contacts at the back of this leaflet).

When will I get the results?

The results of a bone marrow aspirate are usually available in a few days, but the results of a trephine biopsy can take up to two weeks. Some other specialised tests on the marrow, such as examination of the chromosomes, can take more than a month. These results will usually be discussed when you return to the clinic for your next outpatient appointment.

We hope this leaflet has been useful. If you are worried about anything to do with this test, the staff will be very willing to help and advise you.

Where can I get additional help and support?

Staff in the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC), a cancer support and information centre based at Mount Vernon Hospital, are available to help and support you and talk things through. You can drop in without an appointment or call the number on the back of this leaflet.

We all need some help now and again, so if anything about your treatment worries you, please call the LJMC and they will do their best to help you or find someone who can.

