

students with leukemia

What is leukemia?

Leukemia is the most common type of cancer in children. It begins in the bone marrow—the soft, spongy center of long bones—where blood cells are made. The bone marrow produces:

- **White blood cells** to fight infection
- **Red blood cells** to carry oxygen
- **Platelets** to help blood clot and stop bleeding

In leukemia, the body produces too many abnormal white blood cells (called blasts). These cells crowd out healthy blood cells and may spread to the brain, spinal cord, or other organs. There are two main types of leukemia:

- **Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL)** – the most common type, affecting lymphoblasts
- **Acute Myeloblastic Leukemia (AML)** – less common, affecting myeloblasts

Both types involve rapid growth of abnormal cells that interfere with normal blood cell production.

Treatment

Treatment for **Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL)** usually lasts 2½ to 3½ years and includes:

- Weekly chemotherapy for the first 6–10 months
- Monthly chemotherapy for the remainder of treatment
- Spinal taps to deliver chemotherapy into the spinal fluid
- Possible radiation to the brain
- Oral chemotherapy taken at home

Treatment for **Acute Myeloblastic Leukemia (AML)** is more aggressive and includes:

- Intensive chemotherapy over six months
- Possible bone marrow transplant (BMT), which involves high-dose chemotherapy and sometimes radiation, followed by an infusion of healthy bone marrow from a donor
- Children with AML are typically hospitalized during treatment and return to school afterward.

How can leukemia affect a student at school?

Children with leukemia may attend school during and after treatment, but they often face short- and long-term challenges that affect learning. The most common school-related challenges for students with leukemia include:

- **Academic:** frequent absences, drop in academic performance, difficulty with memory and planning, delayed comprehension, slow processing, speech and language delays, ADHD like symptoms
- **Social/Emotional:** low self-esteem, poor body image, depression, loneliness, irritability
- **Physical:** difficulties with fine motor skills, mouth sores, nausea, vomiting, hair loss, fatigue, anemia, motor weakness, possible mobility aids or prosthetics, vision or hearing issues

How can schools support students with leukemia?

Children with leukemia may miss 10–20 weeks of school in a year. Returning to school as soon as medically safe helps restore a sense of normalcy and supports emotional well-being.

Academic

- Start academic interventions under **Section 504** or **IDEA** (Other Health Impairment).
- Conduct **evaluations** for speech, OT/PT, vision/hearing, assistive technology, as needed.
- Offer **homebound** or **intermittent homebound** instruction for extended absences.
- Provide **extended school year** services (winter, spring, summer) if needed.
- Assign a manageable **workload** focused on **quality over quantity**.
- Allow **extra time** for assignments, projects, quizzes, and tests.
- Provide **assistive technology** (computer, tablet, word processor).
- Use **organizational tools** such as checklists, planners, and visual schedules.
- Use **multi-sensory teaching methods** (visual, auditory, tactile) and repetition.
- Record lessons and offer **memory-building** activities.
- Review previously introduced **abstract concepts** daily before introducing new ones.

Social and Emotional

- Allow **hats or scarves** for hair loss and provide peer sensitivity training when appearance changes occur.
- Create opportunities for **academic and social success** and highlight the student's strengths to build confidence.
- Limit **competitive activities** to reduce stress and prevent discouragement.
- Provide **counseling or emotional** support as needed.

Physical

- Provide **two sets of textbooks** (home and school) to reduce fatigue.
- Allow **water bottles** and **snack breaks** during the day.
- Monitor the student during **physical activities** and recess.
- Offer **unrestricted bathroom access** and clinic/nurse passes.
- Modify or excuse from **strenuous physical activities**.
- Allow **early dismissal** from class to avoid crowded hallways.
- Permit **rest breaks** or shortened school days as needed.
- Assign **lockers close** to classrooms or provide two lockers (e.g., upstairs and downstairs).
- Provide a **parking space** near the entrance for easy access.
- Allow **elevator access** if stairs pose a safety risk.
- Maintain **consistent communication** with families (emails, progress notes, conferences).

More Resources

- **American Cancer Society**
cancer.org/
- **Going to School During and After Cancer Treatment**
cancer.org/cancer/childhood-cancer/
- **National Cancer Institute**
cancer.gov/

SCHOOL SERVICES

For more information, visit childrens.com/school-services

