

Meet Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia Expert Anthony Mato

By Julie Grisham, Tuesday, June 12, 2018



Hematologic oncologist Anthony Mato directs MSK's chronic lymphocytic leukemia program.

Summary

MSK hematologist-oncologist Anthony Mato says people who have been diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia should seek out experts in diagnosis and treatment.

Hematologic oncologist [Anthony Mato](#) recently joined Memorial Sloan Kettering from the University of Pennsylvania. At MSK, he directs the [chronic lymphocytic](#)

leukemia (CLL) program. He sees patients in Manhattan and at **MSK Basking Ridge, in New Jersey**.

We recently spoke with Dr. Mato, an internationally recognized leader in CLL, about the disease and MSK's expertise in treating it.

What is CLL and how is it different from other types of leukemia?

CLL is the most common **type of leukemia**. About 20,000 people in the United States are diagnosed every year, almost all of them older adults. CLL occurs when the body begins to make too many B cells, a type of white blood cell. The cancer can spread throughout the blood and bone marrow. It can also affect certain organs, most commonly the lymph nodes and spleen.

Many people don't have symptoms and have no idea that anything is wrong at the time they're diagnosed. The disease is usually detected when someone gets a blood test as part of a regular checkup and they are found to have an elevated white blood cell count. CLL is most common in the elderly, but younger people can be diagnosed with it too.

Some leukemias, such as **acute lymphocytic leukemia** and **acute myeloid leukemia**, need to be treated urgently, but **CLL is treated** only after it causes symptoms. About a third of people who are diagnosed will never have symptoms and therefore won't ever need treatment. But the rest ultimately will. CLL is not a curable disease. As its name suggests, it is a chronic disease. But experts in the field have a number of different ways to keep it under control.

What are the symptoms of CLL?

The **symptoms of CLL** include persistent fevers, fatigue, night sweats, abdominal fullness, and weight loss. As the disease advances, people may be more prone to infections and bleeding because their bone marrow isn't working properly.

Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL)

Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) is the most common chronic leukemia in adults. Therapies for CLL are improving and changing rapidly. [Learn about treatments for CLL.](#)

[Learn more](#)

Rarely, CLL can turn into a more aggressive [type of lymphoma](#). This is called Richter's transformation. It's usually a life-threatening condition that requires urgent treatment.

What would you tell someone who's just been diagnosed with CLL and doesn't have any symptoms?

Even if you are asymptomatic and your doctor says you don't need treatment, it's important to see an expert in CLL soon after you are diagnosed. MSK offers state-of-the-art [diagnostic and prognostic testing](#). This enables doctors here to devise a strategy for each patient from the very beginning. Our patients are updated on the standard of care, as well as on what new therapies are on the horizon and any [clinical trials](#) that may impact them.

MSK has a great deal of experience in determining how closely someone needs to be monitored if they don't have symptoms. Being monitored doesn't necessarily mean that no action is needed. For example, people with CLL still need to receive comprehensive care, like vaccinations to prevent infections and screenings for other health conditions.

People aren't expected to give up longstanding relationships with their regular doctors when they come to MSK for CLL care. We partner with doctors in the community to make sure that people with CLL get excellent care in all areas related to their health.

For those who develop symptoms, what are the treatments for CLL?

We try to prescribe chemotherapy only when absolutely necessary. Targeted chemotherapy-free approaches are available as an alternative to traditional chemotherapy. Three targeted therapies have already been approved for CLL: [ibrutinib \(Imbruvica®\)](#), [venetoclax \(Venclexta®\)](#), and [idelalisib \(Zydelig®\)](#). Several more drugs are on the way. All of these drugs are taken as pills and target molecular changes that are specific to CLL.

“We try to prescribe chemotherapy only when absolutely necessary.”



Anthony Mato

hematologic oncologist

MSK is also a leader in **chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T therapy** for CLL. This is when someone's immune cells are engineered to recognize and attack cancer. Other types of immunotherapy may be effective as well, and that's something we plan to study.

Why did you decide to come to MSK?

The **Leukemia Service** and the whole **Division of Hematologic Oncology** have an incredible commitment to both research and patient care, and that was really a driving force for me. I'm excited to have the opportunity to do the kind of research that I've always wanted to do.

MSK's team approach to care is fundamental to the way we treat CLL. We've formed a CLL working group that meets monthly to coordinate all of our efforts. The program has skilled nurses, pathologists, and pharmacists who are involved in patient care every step of the way.

The incredible collection of scientists, clinicians, and research staff, not only at MSK but also at nearby Weill Cornell Medicine and The Rockefeller University, makes this the perfect place to address important questions in the area of CLL.

Now that you're here and getting settled in, what are your plans?

My colleagues and I plan to start a number of trials to look for better treatments. These trials will incorporate novel drugs and other therapies, as well as studies on how people who have been treated with the standard of care fare in the long term. Because younger people do have the disease, it's important for us to develop different strategies. Our hope is to produce extended remissions, so that people can live a long time without treatment and with an excellent quality of life.

I'm also really happy that I'm able to see patients at MSK Basking Ridge. The care offered there allows people with CLL to participate in the most cutting-edge clinical trials without ever having to come into the city, and they can receive the best follow-up care as well.