

Leukapheresis for Hyperleukocytosis in Acute Leukemia

ALGORITHM 1

Assess for symptoms of leukostasis

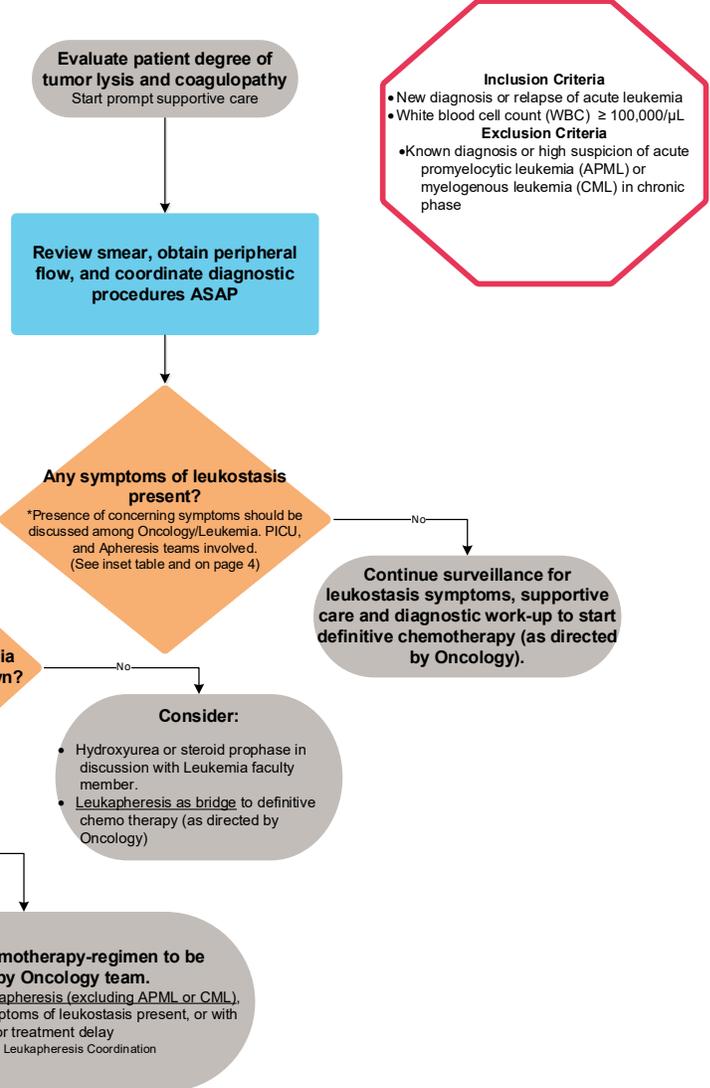
^a Incidence of affected systems in hyperleukocytosis: 27% CNS, 39% respiratory, and 14% renal [7]

^b Severity of symptoms may indicate probability of relevant leukostasis, provided that other causes are not found. Grade 3+: severe, limiting self-care activities of daily living

^c Pulse ox may be unreliable due to increased methemoglobinemia and blood gas analysis can be altered by excessive oxygen consumption by leukocytes [8]. Concern for leukostasis should be highest for true respiratory failure requiring positive pressure or intubation without other clear identifiable causes, rather than mild hypoxia alone.

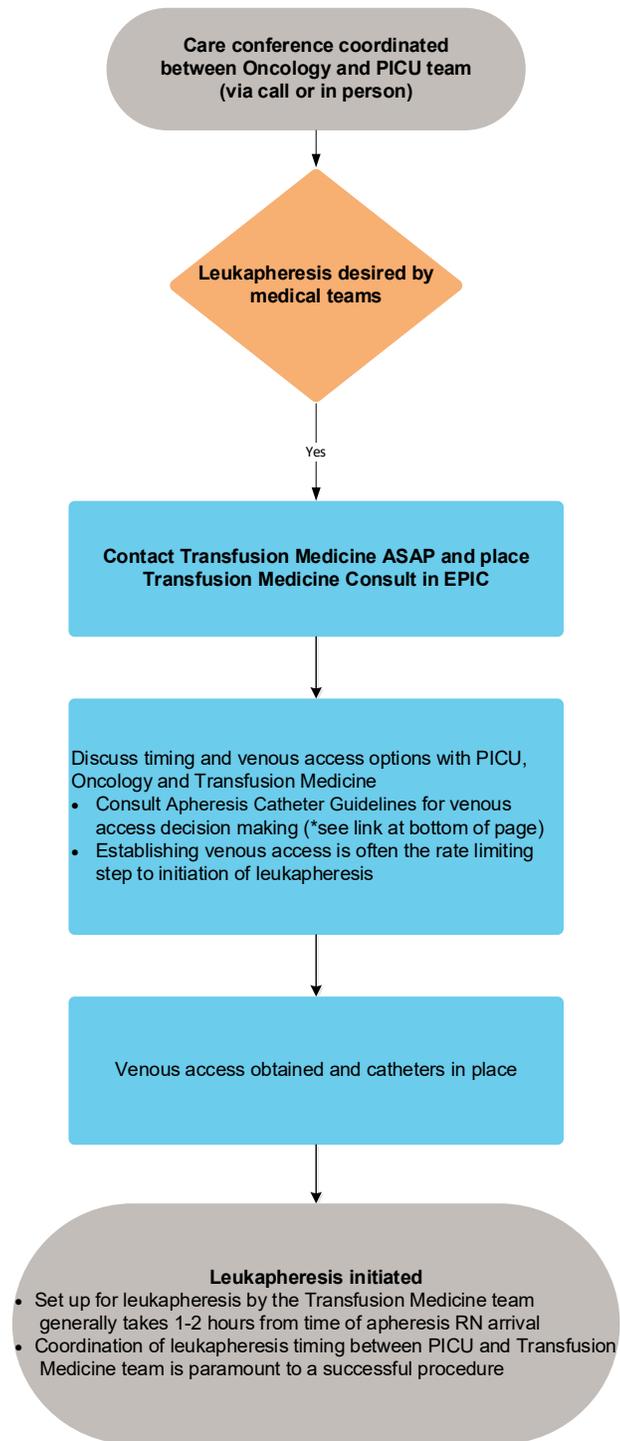
^d The presence of tumor lysis syndrome alone would not indicate "symptomatic leukostasis" given ability to manage with supportive care measures in the vast majority of cases

Affected System ^a	Symptoms ^b	Signs	Imaging findings
Central nervous system (CNS):	Headache Dizziness Vision disturbance Tinnitus Ataxia Confusion Somnolence/coma	Papilledema Retinal hemorrhage Retinal vein distension Cranial nerve palsies	Intracranial ischemia or hemorrhage
Respiratory:	Tachypnea Dyspnea at rest	Hypoxia/hypoxemia ^c Respiratory failure	Bilateral infiltrates on radiographic evaluation of chest Pulmonary hemorrhage
Pulmonary leukostasis syndrome: bilateral infiltrates, tachypnea, hypoxia			
Renal/Metabolic:	Oliguria Anuria	Acute kidney injury Tumor lysis syndrome ^d	
Other:	DIC Priapism Myocardial infarction Arrhythmia Peripheral vascular occlusion		



Leukapheresis Coordination

ALGORITHM 2



[Apheresis Catheter Guidelines: Short Term Use](#)

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TARGET POPULATION

Inclusion Criteria

- New diagnosis or relapse of acute leukemia
- White blood cell count (WBC) \geq 100,000/ μ L

Exclusion Criteria

- Known diagnosis, or high suspicion of, acute promyelocytic leukemia (APML) or chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML) in chronic phase

BACKGROUND | DEFINITIONS

Hyperleukocytosis in Acute Leukemia

Definition

- Hyperleukocytosis: white blood cell (WBC) count \geq 100,000/ μ L
- Indicates increasing risk for leukostasis with subsequent end organ damage (usually affecting central nervous system, lungs and kidneys) and disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC)

Pathophysiology

- Hyperviscosity of blood
 - Due to high fractional volume of leukocytes and the reduced deformability of blasts
 - Blasts are larger diameter than lymphocytes, with average size of myeloblast being larger than lymphoblast [1]
- Increased adhesion of cells to endothelium
 - Upregulation of adhesion molecules (ICAM, VCAM, E-selectin) and increased cytokine (IL-1b, TNF- α) and enzyme (MMP) release seen with hyperleukocytosis, particularly monocytic (M4/M5) acute myeloid leukemia (AML) [2]

Outcomes in Hyperleukocytosis

- Risk of early complications
 - In AML, the risk of respiratory complications (hypoxia, hemorrhage) and neurologic complications (ischemia, hemorrhage) during induction 1 were significantly higher for patients with WBC \geq 100,000/ μ L [3]

- In acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), the overall risk of early complications in the first 14 days is rare, with most occurring at presentation rather than developing
 - Complications occur at lower WBC levels in AML than in ALL
 - Lowe et al reported neurologic complications (grade 3 or 4 toxicity, predominantly central nervous system, CNS, hemorrhage) in 4/111 ALL patients (3.6%) with WBC < 400,000/ μ L versus 12/67 patients (17.9%) with WBC \geq 400,000/ μ L [4]
 - Ablat et al reported neurologic complications (all CNS hemorrhage) in 1/62 ALL patients (1.6%) with WBC < 400,000/ μ L versus 5/22 patients (22.7%) with WBC \geq 650,000/ μ L [5]
- Risk of early death (variably defined as death in first 14 days or during induction)
 - In pediatrics, early death rate in patients with hyperleukocytosis is estimated at 9-17% in AML [3,6] and 4% in ALL (using WBC \geq 200,000/ μ L) [4]
 - Mortality is highest in patients with both respiratory and neurologic symptoms
- The utility of leukapheresis in reducing risk of early complications and/or early death remains unclear (please see page 5 under “Use in hyperleukocytosis” for more information)

INITIAL EVALUATION

Assess for symptoms of leukostasis

Concerning symptoms should be discussed among all involved providers (Oncology/Leukemia, Transfusion Medicine, PICU, etc.) to determine if indication for leukapheresis exists

<u>Affected System^a</u>	<u>Symptoms^b</u>	<u>Signs</u>	<u>Imaging findings</u>
Central nervous system (CNS):	Headache Dizziness Vision disturbance Tinnitus Ataxia Confusion Somnolence/coma	Papilledema Retinal hemorrhage Retinal vein distension Cranial nerve palsies	Intracranial ischemia or hemorrhage
Respiratory:	Tachypnea Dyspnea at rest	Hypoxia/hypoxemia ^c Respiratory failure	Bilateral infiltrates on radiographic evaluation of chest Pulmonary hemorrhage
	“Pulmonary leukostasis syndrome”: bilateral infiltrates, tachypnea, hypoxia		
Renal/Metabolic:	Oliguria Anuria	Acute kidney injury Tumor lysis syndrome ^d	
Other:	DIC Priapism Myocardial infarction Arrhythmia Peripheral vascular occlusion		

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Laboratory and Imaging Assessment

Recommended:

- Complete blood count (CBC) with differential
- Peripheral blood smear
- Peripheral flow cytometry
- Comprehensive metabolic panel (CMP), uric acid
- DIC panel (PT/INR, PTT, D-dimer)
- Chest X-ray
 - Evaluate for presence of mediastinal mass

Other considerations:

- Blood cultures
 - If febrile, ill-appearing, or if starting antibiotics
- Computed tomography (CT) of chest
 - If concern for respiratory failure representing sequelae of leukostasis to evaluate for other potential causes (i.e., pneumonia)
- Head CT or brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) (may consider fast brain MRI/shunt series)
 - If concern for neurologic symptoms representing sequelae of leukostasis to evaluate for hemorrhage or embolic stroke, or to rule out other etiologies (Note: neuroimaging is not required for decision making for leukapheresis and clinical exam remains most important)

CLINICAL MANAGEMENT

Supportive Care

Tumor lysis management

- Hyperhydration with careful fluid management
- Rasburicase ([see guideline](#)) +/- allopurinol
- Amphogel + low phosphorus diet (if not NPO)
- Serial monitoring of potassium, phosphorus, uric acid, and calcium as well as overall renal function

*Please reference the departmental specific resource [“Leukemia and Lymphoma Supportive Care Guidelines: General Management”](#) for specifics regarding tumor lysis management.

Blood product support & optimization of coagulation

- Conservative use of packed red blood cell (PRBC) transfusion due to risk of increased hyperviscosity; if necessary (in setting of developing heart failure, and would generally consider for hgb \leq 4.5), administer small volumes (\leq 5 ml/kg), slowly with frequent re-assessment
- Liberal use of platelet transfusion due to risk of hemorrhage
 - Typically maintain platelets \geq 50,000/ μ L until WBC showing significant improvement, or \geq 100,000/ μ L if concern for stroke or CNS hemorrhage
- Serial monitoring for bleeding and DIC panel

- If active bleeding or DIC:
 - Transfuse fresh frozen plasma (FFP) to maintain PT and PTT within normal limits
 - Transfuse cryoprecipitate to maintain fibrinogen > 100-150 mg/dL
- Avoid routine use of heparin or anti-fibrinolytics

Prevention/treatment of infection

- If history of fevers or febrile at presentation, or ill-appearing at any time, start empiric antimicrobials
 - Cefepime recommended for broad coverage with consideration of adding Vancomycin if ill-appearing

Cytoreduction

Chemotherapy

- Prompt initiation of definitive versus temporizing (hydroxyurea, steroid, or low-dose cytarabine prophase) chemotherapy should be started based on patient's likely leukemia phenotype and clinical status, as determined by Oncology/Leukemia team

Leukapheresis

- Rationale
 - Provides prompt leukoreduction to be used as an adjunct, or bridge, to starting definitive therapy
 - Historically, was also used to control or prevent metabolic complications (tumor lysis), though this is less applicable now with the consistent use of rasburicase and other aggressive supportive care measures [3]
- Use in hyperleukocytosis
 - There are no definitive conclusions for the efficacy of leukapheresis in hyperleukocytosis. Evaluation of published literature is difficult due to: retrospective studies, lack of consistency in decision to treat and subsequent selection bias (majority of studies use physician discretion as indication for leukapheresis), variability in treatment (+/- concomitant chemotherapy) and outcome measures, and the routine use of historical controls for comparison
 - In pediatric ALL, Nguyen et al showed there was no significant difference in the rate of early complications between leukapheresed (n=9) and non-leukapheresed (n=44) patients [9]
 - In AML, there is conflicting data regarding effect of leukapheresis on the risk of early death
 - A reduction in early death following leukapheresis is reported in several adult AML studies, but with no associated difference in remission rate or long-term survival [10-12]
 - No difference in early death following leukapheresis was seen in pediatric AML [3] and adult AML [13, 14] studies, or in meta-analyses [15, 16]
 - American Society of Apheresis Guidelines [17] (Figure 1)
 - Leukapheresis has a category II indication (accepted as second-line therapy, either as a standalone treatment or in conjunction with other modes of treatment) for the treatment of symptomatic leukostasis
 - No well-accepted criteria for defining symptomatic leukostasis
 - To better define symptoms, Novotny et al introduced a grading system for an individual patient's risk of leukostasis [18] (Figure 2), with the high probability group showing higher risk of early death in a secondary analysis [19]
 - "Chemotherapy should not be postponed and is required to prevent rapid re-accumulation of circulating blasts" [18]

- Leukapheresis has a category III indication (role not well established so decision making should be individualized) for prophylaxis in high-risk patients (AML with WBC $\geq 100,000/\mu\text{L}$, especially monocytic AML, or ALL with WBC $\geq 400,000/\mu\text{L}$)
- Leukapheresis procedure
 - Procedure basics
 - Age: Leukapheresis has been performed on even very young patients, but in these patients, one could also consider use of manual exchange transfusion for leukoreduction as well [20]
 - Access: Requires a rigid, large diameter catheter to provide consistent flow and a minimally traumatic environment for removal of WBCs
 - CHCO Requirements: dual lumen, each at least 4 French diameter for turbo flow
 - See most updated Apheresis Catheter Guidelines available at: [Apheresis Catheter Guidelines: Short Term Use](#)
 - Timing:
 - Apheresis is available at CHCO at any time if deemed clinically indicated
 - Typically requires 1-2 hours of transfusion medicine preparation before procedure can start, assuming appropriate access obtained, and takes approximately 2-6 hours to complete procedure
 - Risks: Overall well tolerated and safe at experienced institutions
 - Delay in starting definitive chemotherapy [3,4,14]
 - Line-associated risk of bacteremia/sepsis, bleeding, or thrombosis
 - Transfusion reaction (priming performed with PRBCs)
 - Hypocalcemia secondary to citrate anticoagulant (calcium supplement routinely given and calcium levels monitored during procedure)
 - Blood loss (mean reductions of 45% and 16% in platelet count and hemoglobin, respectively) [21]
 - Goal
 - No universally accepted criteria, but general goal is for resolution of leukostasis symptoms and WBC $< 100,000/\mu\text{L}$ (AML) or $< 400,000/\mu\text{L}$ (ALL)
 - One procedure typically processes 1-2 total blood volumes and can reduce WBC by 30-60% [17]; thus, most patients require only one procedure

Figure 1: American Society of Apheresis Recommendations for Use of Leukapheresis in Hyperleukocytosis [17]

HYPERLEUKOCYTOSIS

Incidence: AML: WBC >100×10 ⁹ /L; 5-13% adults; ALL: WBC >400×10 ⁹ /L; 10-30% adults	Indication	Procedure	Recommendation	Category
	Symptomatic	Leukocytapheresis	Grade 2B	II
	Prophylactic or secondary	Leukocytapheresis	Grade 2C	III
# reported patients: >300	RCT	CT	CS	CR
AML	0	14(2400)	NA	NA
ALL	0	6(578)	NA	NA

AML = acute myeloid leukemia; ALL = acute lymphoblastic leukemia

Figure 2: Probability of Leukostasis Deduced from the Severity of Symptoms Attribute to Leukostasis (no obvious other causes) [18]

Group	Probability of leukostasis syndrome	Severity of symptoms	Pulmonary symptoms	Neurologic symptoms	Other organ systems
0	Not present	No limitations	No symptoms and no limitations in ordinary activities	No neurologic symptoms	No symptoms
1	Possible	Slight limitations	Mild symptoms and slight limitation during ordinary activity, comfortable at rest	Mild tinnitus, headache, dizziness	Moderate fatigue
2	Probable	Marked limitations	Marked limitation in activity because of symptoms, even during less than ordinary activity, comfortable only at rest	Slight visual disturbances ¹ , severe tinnitus, headache, dizziness	Severe fatigue
3	Highly probable	Severe limitations	Dyspnoea at rest, oxygen or respirator required	Severe visual disturbances ¹ (acute inability to read), confusion, delirium, somnolence, intracranial haemorrhage	Myocardial infarction, priapism, ischaemic necrosis

¹Blurred vision, diplopia, hemianopia.

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REVIEW | REVISION SCHEDULE

Scheduled for full review on November 22, 2025

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