

## Media Release

EMBARGOED TUESDAY 17 AUGUST

### **Aussies with blood cancer need more support than ever as COVID-19 and lockdowns prove detrimental to mental health, hinders access to care**

- **New research reveals more than 1 in 3 blood cancer patients experiencing significant psychological distress about their diagnosis and treatment since pandemic began**
- **Support urgently needed for 110,000 Australians already living with blood cancer as incidence and mortality rates continue to rise**
- **Registrations now open for Leukaemia Foundation Light the Night event to rally national blood cancer community in united evening of hope**

The Leukaemia Foundation is today casting the spotlight on concerning new research highlighting the urgent need for greater support for blood cancer patients in Australia as the COVID-19 pandemic continues wreaking havoc on patients' mental and physical health.

The research shows that at least 35% of blood cancer patients - more than one in three - have experienced clinically significant psychological distress regarding their diagnosis and treatment journey since the pandemic began<sup>1</sup>, an increase of 17% for patients with the same diagnosis in 2016<sup>2</sup>.

Equally concerning is the fact that one in four patients reported they did not believe their supportive care and information needs about their blood cancer diagnosis had been met throughout the pandemic – a significant increase of 20% from the previous survey period.

"As an organisation solely focused on standing with and for Australians living with blood cancer, we find this latest research alarming. It's clear that blood cancer patients are not receiving the adequate supportive care or information they need to fight their diagnosis in this challenging climate and the lasting impacts of this psychologically, physically and from a survivability perspective could potentially be devastating," said Leukaemia Foundation CEO Chris Tanti.

Blood cancer figures continue to rise year on year in Australia, with blood cancers combined recently rising ranks to become the second most diagnosed cancer and the second most common cause of cancer related deaths in the country<sup>3</sup>.

These latest findings released today reinforce the Leukaemia Foundation's continued call for greater support for the more than 110,000 Australians already living with blood cancer as the impacts of COVID-19, frequent lockdowns, restrictions and increased isolation deeply affect their health.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s00520-021-06369-5.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00520-016-3282-3>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/cancer/cancer-data-in-australia/contents/summary>

"We already know that blood cancer patients are amongst the most vulnerable Australians when it comes to COVID-19 as their condition and the effects of their rigorous treatments render them severely immunocompromised. So, it's not surprising that they are experiencing such heightened feelings of psychological distress, fear for their future and lack of support," Mr Tanti said.

During the peak of the pandemic in 2020, the Leukaemia Foundation experienced a massive 30% increase in demand for its services and in the past year has provided over 22,000 support interactions to patients via phone, email, text message, video call and other forms of communication through its Blood Cancer Support Coordinators.

"Whilst we are proud of the support we've provided to people living with blood cancer during the pandemic, if we are to see better health outcomes and reduced mortality rates in coming years, then more support needs to be made available to blood cancer patients now, so they are armed with all the resources and contact they need to fight their diagnosis or live well with it," Mr Tanti said.

Every October the Leukaemia Foundation invites all Australians impacted by blood cancer and their loved ones, supporters and carers to come together for the Leukaemia Foundation's annual Light the Night event to support each other, connect and share stories in a night of unity.

"Registering for Light the Night is a simple way that every Australian can visibly show their support for people living with blood cancer, so that they know we are all standing with them in their fight every day, and especially on their darkest days. The latest research further spotlights the urgent need to step up this support and we are calling on the national community to show up for their fellow Australians living with blood cancer," Mr Tanti said.

This year's Light the Night is shaping up as one of the most important yet, as Australians affected by blood cancer and their loved ones look forward to a special event connecting them with the wider blood cancer community. The evening presents a moment in time for these Australians to find comfort in the fact that they are not alone in their journey, while giving everyday Australians an opportunity to fundraise in support of them.

Prior to COVID-19, Light the Night involved large crowds and beautiful evening lantern walks held in capital cities and regional towns right across the country, bringing people together in solidarity with the blood cancer community. But with restrictions in place for a second year, families from every corner of Australia are expected to light up the night skies from their backyards, loungerooms and hospital wards and tune in via a virtual lantern lighting ceremony streamed across the nation on Saturday 16 October.

"This year's Light the Night couldn't come at a better time and thanks to the new format involving a virtual lantern lighting ceremony, no matter where you live, or how you've been impacted by blood cancer, everyone has the opportunity to participate and create their own special experience with loved ones as we all rally together to hope for a better future and greater support for those diagnosed with blood cancer," Mr Tanti said.

Popular television presenter and much-loved media personality, Osher Gunsberg, will be hosting Light the Night for a second year and bringing the event into people's homes. Sadly, Osher himself is no stranger to blood cancer with his mother passing away from myeloma in 2018.

**Registrations are now open for the Leukaemia Foundation's Light the Night event on Saturday 16 October. To sign up and register your event, go to [lightthenight.org.au](http://lightthenight.org.au) and gather your loved ones to safely join in the virtual lantern ceremony at nightfall.**

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**Blood Cancer in Australia – facts and figures**

- Blood cancer figures continue to rise year on year in Australia, with blood cancers combined recently confirmed to be the second most diagnosed cancer and the second most common cause of cancer related deaths in the country<sup>4</sup>.
- Every year, 18,485 Australians will be newly diagnosed with blood cancer such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma. In Australia today, more than 50 people will be told they have blood cancer – equivalent to one person every 28 minutes.
- Every day, 15 Australians are losing their battle with blood cancer. The disease is expected to claim the lives of more than 5,600 people this year alone.
- More than 110,000 people are living with blood cancer or a related blood disorder in Australia today. Come 2035, it is projected 275,000 Australians will be living with a blood cancer or blood disorder.
- The incidence of blood cancer continues to grow – over the past 10 years alone, the incidence of blood cancer has increased by 40%.
- Blood cancer does not discriminate. It can develop in anyone and can occur at any age and at any stage of life across all states and territories, from children to adolescents and young adults to working adults with families and older Australians.
- Unlike many other cancers, there are no screening programs available for blood cancer, and there is no way to prevent blood cancer through lifestyle change.
- Blood cancer symptoms can sometimes be subtle or similar to other conditions such as a virus, often making it a silent disease that can be difficult to catch.

**Blood cancer signs and symptoms:** Symptoms of all blood cancers can sometimes be subtle or even similar to other conditions, such as a flu. However, ongoing symptoms like recurrent infections, increased fatigue, night sweats, bone pain, bruising or enlarged lymph nodes should be immediately discussed with your GP or specialist. Early diagnosis can play a key role in surviving blood cancer, so it is crucially important that you are examined and treated properly. If you or someone you love is diagnosed with a blood cancer, reach out to the Leukaemia Foundation on 1800 620 420. Accessing our support is free of charge.

**About the Leukaemia Foundation:** The Leukaemia Foundation stands with Australia to help cure and conquer blood cancer – with care. Together we are attacking every blood cancer, from every direction, in every way we can. We stand beside every Australian to be their voice and their someone-to-turn-to, fighting to get them access to the best care. We also accelerate research that's delivering rapid advancements in blood cancer diagnosis and treatments. Plus, we provide services and support that empower people living with any blood cancer to live well after diagnosis. You can learn more about the Leukaemia Foundation and blood cancer at [leukaemia.org.au](http://leukaemia.org.au).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/cancer/cancer-data-in-australia/contents/summary>