

ADVANCES IN DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF MULTIPLE MYELOMA: A MOLECULAR AND THERAPEUTIC UPDATE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19415294>



How to cite this Article: Gamal Abdul Hamid^{*1,2}, Ivan Saleh¹. (2026). Advances In Diagnosis and Treatment of Multiple Myeloma: A Molecular and Therapeutic Update. *European Journal of Pharmaceutical and Medical Research*, 13(4), 281–286. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

Article Received on 05/03/2026

Article Revised on 25/03/2026

Article Published on 04/04/2026

ABSTRACT

Multiple myeloma (MM) is a clinically and biologically heterogeneous plasma cell malignancy, representing the second most common hematologic cancer. Recent years have witnessed transformative advances in molecular diagnostics, risk stratification, and therapeutic modalities, leading to significantly improved survival outcomes. This review provides a comprehensive update on the epidemiology, molecular pathogenesis, diagnostic criteria, staging systems, and contemporary treatment paradigms of MM. Emphasis is placed on the integration of next-generation sequencing, fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH), and minimal residual disease (MRD) monitoring into clinical practice. The advent of proteasome inhibitors, immunomodulatory drugs, monoclonal antibodies, chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy, and bispecific antibodies has redefined MM management. Despite these advances, high-risk cytogenetic subgroups continue to pose therapeutic challenges. This manuscript highlights the shift toward personalized medicine in MM, discusses current clinical challenges, and outlines future research directions aimed at achieving durable remissions and potential cure.

KEYWORDS: Multiple myeloma, MGUS, cytogenetics, proteasome inhibitors, immunomodulatory drugs, CAR-T therapy, minimal residual disease, personalized medicine.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multiple myeloma (MM) is a clonal plasma cell malignancy characterized by the uncontrolled proliferation of malignant plasma cells within the bone marrow, the production of monoclonal immunoglobulins, and associated end-organ dysfunction.^[1] Despite accounting for only 1.8% of all new cancer diagnoses, MM is the second most prevalent hematologic malignancy and contributes to 2.1% of cancer-related deaths in the United States.^[2] The disease evolves along a clinical continuum, beginning with an asymptomatic premalignant phase termed monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS), progressing to smoldering multiple myeloma (SMM), and culminating in active symptomatic MM marked by hypercalcemia, renal failure, anemia, and bone lesions (CRAB criteria).^[3]

Historically, MM was associated with a poor prognosis, with a median survival of less than three years in the pre-novel therapy era. However, the past two decades have witnessed a paradigm shift in MM management, driven by profound insights into its molecular pathogenesis, the advent of high-throughput genomic technologies, and the development of targeted therapeutic agents.^[4] The introduction of proteasome inhibitors (e.g., bortezomib), immunomodulatory drugs (e.g., lenalidomide), monoclonal antibodies (e.g., daratumumab), and, more recently, cellular therapies such as chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cells, has dramatically improved patient outcomes, transforming MM into a chronic, manageable condition for many.^[5]

Nevertheless, MM remains biologically heterogeneous and genetically complex. High-risk cytogenetic abnormalities, including del(17p), t(4;14), t(14;16), and amplification of 1q, continue to confer poor prognosis

and suboptimal responses to conventional therapies.^[6] Furthermore, the emergence of clonal evolution and therapy-resistant subclones poses significant challenges to achieving durable remissions.^[7] In this context, the integration of advanced molecular diagnostics—such as next-generation sequencing (NGS), fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH), and minimal residual disease (MRD) monitoring—has become indispensable for risk stratification, treatment personalization, and prognostication.^[8]

This review synthesizes the latest advancements in the diagnosis, risk stratification, and treatment of MM, with a particular emphasis on molecular innovations, emerging therapeutic modalities, and the evolving role of personalized medicine in improving clinical outcomes and overcoming therapeutic resistance.

2. EPIDEMIOLOGY

The global incidence of MM varies significantly by geographic region and ethnicity. The annual age-standardized incidence rate is approximately 5–7 per 100,000 in Western countries, with higher rates reported among African Americans (approximately 15 per 100,000) and lower rates in Asian populations.^[9] MM is predominantly a disease of older adults, with a median age at diagnosis of 69 years. Only 2% of patients are diagnosed under the age of 40.^[10]

Male gender, advancing age, African ancestry, family history of MM or MGUS, and obesity are established risk factors.^[11] Environmental exposures, such as agricultural chemicals, benzene, and ionizing radiation, have also been implicated, though evidence remains inconclusive.^[12] Importantly, nearly all cases of MM are preceded by MGUS, which progresses to MM at a rate of about 1% per year.^[13]

3. CLASSIFICATION AND STAGING

3.1. Disease Classification

The International Myeloma Working Group (IMWG) criteria classify plasma cell disorders into:

- **MGUS:** Serum M-protein <3 g/dL, bone marrow plasma cells <10%, absence of CRAB features or myeloma-defining events.^[14]
- **SMM:** Serum M-protein ≥3 g/dL and/or bone marrow plasma cells 10–60%, absence of CRAB features or myeloma-defining events.^[15]
- **Active MM:** Clonal bone marrow plasma cells ≥10% or biopsy-proven plasmacytoma, plus one or more myeloma-defining events (CRAB features: hypercalcemia, renal failure, anemia, bone lesions; or biomarkers of malignancy: clonal bone marrow plasma cells ≥60%, serum free light chain ratio ≥100, >1 focal lesion on MRI).^[16]

3.2. Staging Systems

- **Durie-Salmon Staging System:** An older system based on hemoglobin, calcium, M-protein levels, and bone lesions.^[17]

- **International Staging System (ISS):** Based on serum β 2-microglobulin and albumin levels.^[18]
- **Revised ISS (R-ISS):** Incorporates ISS, LDH levels, and high-risk cytogenetic abnormalities [del(17p), t(4;14), t(14;16)].^[19]
- **R2-ISS:** A newly proposed model that integrates gain/amplification of chromosome 1q to better stratify intermediate-risk patients.^[20]

4. MOLECULAR BIOLOGY AND CYTOGENETICS

MM is characterized by complex genomic alterations that drive pathogenesis, progression, and therapy resistance.^[21]

4.1. Primary Cytogenetic Abnormalities

These are early, foundational events

- **Hyperdiploidy (HRD):** Present in ~45% of cases, involves trisomies of odd-numbered chromosomes (3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 15, 19, 21). Associated with favorable prognosis.^[22]
- **IgH Translocations:** Occur in ~40% of cases, place oncogenes under the control of the IgH enhancer.^[23]
 - **t(11;14)(q13;q32):** Most common (15–20%), leads to CCND1 (cyclin D1) overexpression; generally favorable risk.^[24]
 - **t(4;14)(p16;q32):** 10–15% of cases, involves FGFR3 and NSD2 (MMSET); considered high-risk.^[25]
 - **t(14;16)(q32;q23) & t(14;20)(q32;q11):** Rare (<5%), involve MAF and MAFB oncogenes; associated with poor prognosis and renal involvement.^[26]

4.2. Secondary Cytogenetic Abnormalities

Acquired during disease progression, associated with advanced disease and resistance.^[27]

del(17p)/TP53 loss: High-risk marker, associated with extramedullary disease and poor survival.^[28]

- **Gain/amplification of 1q:** Present in 30–40%, correlated with proliferative disease and inferior outcomes.^[29]
- **RAS/MAPK pathway mutations:** NRAS, KRAS (40%), BRAF (7%).^[30]
- **MYC rearrangements:** Occur in 20–50% of advanced MM.^[31]
- **NF- κ B pathway dysregulation:** Mutations in TRAF3, NFKB2, etc., promote survival and therapy resistance.^[32]

4.3. The Bone Marrow Microenvironment

MM cells interact with stromal cells, osteoblasts, osteoclasts, and immune cells via cytokines (IL-6, VEGF, IGF-1) and adhesion molecules (VLA-4, VCAM-1), creating a pro-tumorigenic niche that supports growth, angiogenesis, bone destruction, and drug resistance.^[33]

5. DIAGNOSIS

The diagnostic workup for MM is multidisciplinary and includes.^[34]

1. Laboratory Studies

- Complete blood count, creatinine, calcium, albumin, β 2-microglobulin, LDH.
- Serum protein electrophoresis (SPEP) and immunofixation (IFE) to quantify and type M-protein.
- Serum free light chain assay (FLC) for ratio assessment.
- 24-hour urine protein electrophoresis and immunofixation.

2. Bone Marrow Examination

- Aspirate and biopsy for morphology, immunophenotyping (CD138+), and plasma cell percentage.
- Cytogenetics (karyotyping) and FISH for high-risk abnormalities.
- Next-generation sequencing for mutational profiling.

3. Imaging

- Whole-body low-dose CT, MRI (spine/pelvis), or PET-CT to detect lytic lesions, extramedullary disease, and assess treatment response.

Minimal Residual Disease (MRD) assessment via next-generation flow cytometry or next-generation sequencing is increasingly used to evaluate depth of response and guide therapy.^[35]

6. CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS

Clinical features result from plasma cell infiltration, paraprotein effects, and immune dysfunction.^[36]

- **Skeletal:** Bone pain, pathologic fractures, lytic lesions, hypercalcemia.
- **Renal:** Acute kidney injury (light-chain cast nephropathy), chronic kidney disease.
- **Hematologic:** Anemia, neutropenia, thrombocytopenia.
- **Infectious:** Recurrent bacterial infections due to hypogammaglobulinemia.
- **Neurologic:** Peripheral neuropathy, spinal cord compression.
- **Constitutional:** Fatigue, weight loss, hyperviscosity syndrome.

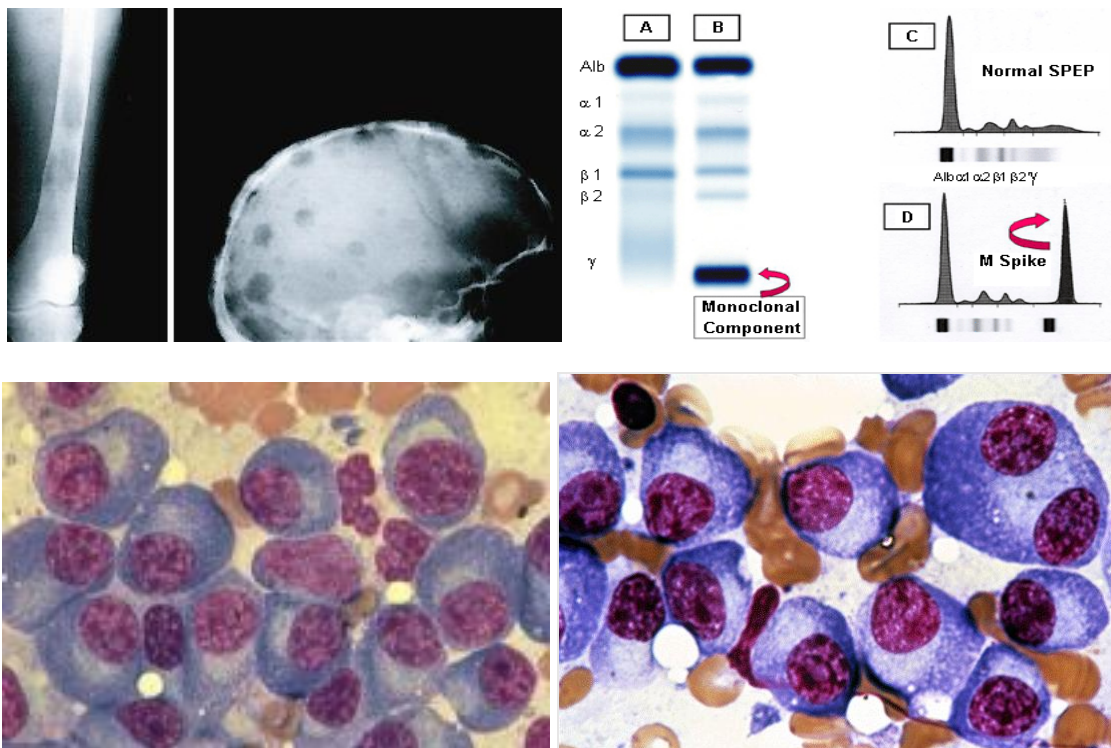


Figure 1. Osteolytic lesions, Normal and pathological monoclonal component in SPEP and bone marrow plasma cells.

7. TREATMENT ADVANCES

Treatment strategies are tailored based on transplant eligibility, age, performance status, and cytogenetic risk.^[37]

7.1. Newly Diagnosed Transplant-Eligible Patients

- **Induction Therapy:** Triplet regimens such as bortezomib/lenalidomide/dexamethasone (VRd) or carfilzomib/lenalidomide/dexamethasone (KRd) for 3–4 cycles.^[38]

- **Autologous Stem Cell Transplantation (ASCT):** High-dose melphalan followed by ASCT remains standard for eligible patients.^[39]
- **Consolidation/Maintenance:** Post-ASCT maintenance with lenalidomide improves progression-free and overall survival. Proteasome inhibitor-based maintenance is considered for high-risk disease.^[40]

7.2. Newly Diagnosed Transplant-Ineligible Patients

- **First-line Therapy:** Daratumumab/lenalidomide/dexamethasone (DRd) or bortezomib/melphalan/prednisone (VMP) are preferred.^[41]
- **Continuous Therapy:** Until progression or intolerance.

7.3. Relapsed/Refractory Multiple Myeloma (RRMM)

The treatment landscape has expanded dramatically.^[42]

- **Monoclonal Antibodies**
 - Daratumumab and isatuximab (anti-CD38).^[43]
 - Elotuzumab (anti-SLAMF7).^[44]
- **CAR T-Cell Therapies**
 - Idecabtagene vicleucel (anti-BCMA).^[45]
 - Ciltacabtagene autoleucel (anti-BCMA).^[46]
- **Bispecific T-Cell Engagers (BiTEs)**
 - Teclistamab (BCMA \times CD3).^[47]
 - Talquetamab (GPRC5D \times CD3).^[48]
- **Novel Small Molecules**
 - Selinexor (XPO1 inhibitor).^[49]
 - Venetoclax (BCL2 inhibitor; particularly effective in t(11;14) MM).^[50]
 - Melflufen (peptide-drug conjugate).^[51]

7.4. Supportive Care

- Bisphosphonates (zoledronic acid) or denosumab for bone health.^[52]
- Erythropoiesis-stimulating agents, transfusions for anemia.
- Infection prophylaxis (antivirals, antibiotics, IVIg in selected cases).
- Management of treatment-related adverse effects (peripheral neuropathy, cytopenias, cardiac toxicity).

8. DISCUSSION

The management of MM has evolved from palliation to a precision medicine approach, driven by deep molecular profiling and biomarker-guided therapy. The integration of FISH, NGS, and MRD monitoring has refined risk stratification and treatment personalization.^[53] Despite remarkable progress, several challenges persist:

- **High-Risk MM:** Patients with del(17p), amp(1q), or dual-hit genetics continue to have poor outcomes despite novel therapies.^[54]

- **Treatment Resistance:** Clonal evolution and microenvironment-mediated resistance lead to relapse.^[55]
- **Access and Cost:** Advanced therapies (CAR-T, bispecifics) are expensive and not universally accessible.^[56]
- **Long-Term Toxicity:** Prolonged therapy can lead to secondary malignancies, organ toxicity, and diminished quality of life.^[57]

Future directions include

- Development of next-generation immunotherapies (allogeneic CAR-T, NK cell therapies).^[58]
- Targeting the bone marrow niche and immune microenvironment.^[59]
- Epigenetic therapies and combination regimens to overcome resistance.^[60]
- Universal MRD-driven treatment algorithms to guide therapy duration and escalation.^[61]

9. CONCLUSION

Multiple myeloma remains a complex and heterogeneous disease, but unprecedented advances in molecular diagnostics and targeted therapeutics have transformed its prognosis. The shift toward personalized, risk-adapted therapy has improved survival and quality of life for many patients. Ongoing research into disease biology, resistance mechanisms, and novel immunotherapies holds promise for further improving outcomes, particularly in high-risk disease. A multidisciplinary, patient-centered approach, incorporating the latest diagnostic and therapeutic innovations, is essential for optimizing MM care in the modern era.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Funding: None.

Ethical

Approval: Not applicable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: None.

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