# London bus driver’s misdiagnosed back pain reveals incurable blood cancer



A bus driver from Chislehurst, south-east London, who initially believed his severe back pain was caused by a simple injury, is now confronting a diagnosis of incurable blood cancer. Terry Harper, 62, began experiencing intense backache in early 2022 after lifting a vacuum-packed mattress. His symptoms were first attributed to slipped discs, but subsequent investigations revealed he was suffering from stage 3 multiple myeloma, a serious cancer affecting plasma cells in bone marrow.

Mr Harper described the shock of the diagnosis to The Independent, recalling his disbelief upon learning that cancer had damaged his spine. The disease had not only attacked his vertebrae—causing a loss of 4.5 inches in height and collapsed discs—but also formed 12 tumours along his spine and led to osteoporosis, a condition that weakens bones. His initial chemotherapy treatment began in December 2023, but the cancer returned by June this year, necessitating renewed treatment.

Multiple myeloma is a relatively rare but serious blood cancer that impacts plasma cells responsible for immune function. Although just 2% of all cancer types, it is the third most common form of blood cancer in the UK, with more than 33,000 people currently living with the condition. Its symptoms are often vague and can mimic more common ailments, such as general ageing or minor injuries, contributing to significant delays in diagnosis. Bone pain—especially in the back, hips, and ribs—fatigue, muscle weakness, and recurrent infections signal the disease but can be easily overlooked.

Experts highlight the diagnostic challenge posed by myeloma. According to Janis McCulloch, head of campaigns at Myeloma UK, the condition has one of the longest diagnostic intervals among cancers, emphasizing the crucial need for earlier detection to prevent severe damage. Princess Royal University Hospital, where Mr Harper was treated, acknowledged the difficulty in diagnosing myeloma early, noting that patients presenting with back pain have less than a 1% chance of it being due to cancer. The hospital expressed willingness to discuss Mr Harper’s case further, following his dissatisfaction with initial care.

Treatment for multiple myeloma depends on the stage and symptoms, involving chemotherapy, targeted therapies, immunotherapy, and sometimes bone marrow transplants. Clinical management also focuses on alleviating bone pain, mitigating complications like kidney damage, anemia, and infections, and slowing the growth of malignant plasma cells. Despite these therapies, the disease remains incurable for many, necessitating ongoing treatment and support.

The human cost extends beyond health, as illustrated by Mr Harper’s struggle to balance work, treatment, and financial pressures. Although he continues to work four days a week and receives 80% of his wage as sick pay, this income alongside his £100 weekly benefits does not cover basic living expenses. His partner, also a bus driver, is working six days a week to support the household. To ease the burden, Mr Harper's daughter has initiated a GoFundMe campaign aiming to raise £1,800 to help cover household bills and allow him time to recover properly from his treatments.

Multiple myeloma predominantly affects older adults, with most diagnoses occurring in individuals in their late 60s or older. Men, people of Black ethnicity, those with a family history of myeloma, and individuals with particular precursor conditions are at increased risk. Common symptoms beyond bone pain include fractures, fatigue, confusion, numbness or weakness in legs, swelling, appetite changes, and frequent infections. Complications can arise from elevated blood calcium levels, spinal cord compression, and peripheral neuropathy, further impacting quality of life.

The challenge of early diagnosis is compounded by symptom overlap with less serious conditions, prompting calls from patient advocates and healthcare professionals for heightened awareness and government support to improve screening and diagnostic pathways. For individuals like Mr Harper, timely and accurate diagnosis is critical to managing the disease's progression and mitigating its devastating physical and financial effects.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html), [[2]](https://www.akamai.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-myeloma/symptoms-causes/syc-20353378), [[6]](https://amp.cancer.org/cancer/types/multiple-myeloma/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html), [[6]](https://amp.cancer.org/cancer/types/multiple-myeloma/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html), [[6]](https://amp.cancer.org/cancer/types/multiple-myeloma/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html), [[3]](https://www.akamai.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-myeloma/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20353383), [[4]](https://www.mdanderson.org/cancer-types/multiple-myeloma.html), [[5]](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/myeloma-bone-disease-multiple-myeloma/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html), [[2]](https://www.akamai.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-myeloma/symptoms-causes/syc-20353378), [[4]](https://www.mdanderson.org/cancer-types/multiple-myeloma.html), [[6]](https://amp.cancer.org/cancer/types/multiple-myeloma/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html), [[7]](https://www.webmd.com/cancer/multiple-myeloma/multiple-myeloma-symptoms-causes-treatment/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/blood-cancer-myeloma-symptoms-injured-back-b2824010.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.akamai.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-myeloma/symptoms-causes/syc-20353378> - Multiple myeloma is a cancer of the plasma cells in bone marrow. The exact cause is unclear, but it begins when a plasma cell becomes cancerous and multiplies rapidly, crowding out healthy blood cells. This leads to symptoms like bone pain, fatigue, and increased infection risk. Risk factors include age (most diagnoses occur in late 60s), male gender, Black ethnicity, family history, and having monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS). Complications can involve infections, bone issues, kidney problems, and anemia.
3. <https://www.akamai.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-myeloma/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20353383> - Treatment for multiple myeloma depends on symptoms and disease progression. Options include chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, CAR-T cell therapy, corticosteroids, bone marrow transplant, and radiation therapy. In early stages without symptoms, doctors may monitor the disease. Treatments aim to control myeloma, alleviate pain, manage complications, and slow cell growth. Clinical trials may offer access to new therapies. Managing complications like bone pain, kidney damage, infections, bone loss, and anemia is also crucial.
4. <https://www.mdanderson.org/cancer-types/multiple-myeloma.html> - Multiple myeloma is a cancer of plasma cells in bone marrow, leading to bone pain, fractures, fatigue, and increased infection risk. Symptoms may include bone pain, fractures, fatigue, confusion, numbness, leg swelling, appetite changes, and frequent infections. Risk factors encompass age over 65, male gender, Black ethnicity, family history, radiation exposure, and obesity. Diagnosis involves blood and urine tests, imaging, and bone marrow biopsy. Treatment options include chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, stem cell transplant, and radiation therapy.
5. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/myeloma-bone-disease-multiple-myeloma/> - Multiple myeloma is a cancer of plasma cells in bone marrow, leading to bone pain, fractures, fatigue, and increased infection risk. Symptoms may include bone pain, fractures, fatigue, confusion, numbness, leg swelling, appetite changes, and frequent infections. Risk factors encompass age over 65, male gender, Black ethnicity, family history, radiation exposure, and obesity. Diagnosis involves blood and urine tests, imaging, and bone marrow biopsy. Treatment options include chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, stem cell transplant, and radiation therapy.
6. <https://amp.cancer.org/cancer/types/multiple-myeloma/detection-diagnosis-staging/signs-symptoms.html> - Multiple myeloma symptoms can include bone pain (especially in the back, ribs, or hips), bone weakness, fractures, fatigue, shortness of breath, confusion, numbness or weakness in legs, leg swelling, appetite changes, and frequent infections. High blood calcium levels can cause extreme thirst, urination, dehydration, kidney problems, constipation, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, weakness, drowsiness, and confusion. Spinal cord compression can lead to sudden severe back pain, numbness, and muscle weakness in legs. Peripheral neuropathy may cause weakness, numbness, or 'pins and needles' sensation.
7. <https://www.webmd.com/cancer/multiple-myeloma/multiple-myeloma-symptoms-causes-treatment/> - Multiple myeloma is a cancer of plasma cells in bone marrow, leading to bone pain, fractures, fatigue, and increased infection risk. Symptoms may include bone pain, fractures, fatigue, confusion, numbness, leg swelling, appetite changes, and frequent infections. Risk factors encompass age over 65, male gender, Black ethnicity, family history, radiation exposure, and obesity. Diagnosis involves blood and urine tests, imaging, and bone marrow biopsy. Treatment options include chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, stem cell transplant, and radiation therapy.