

Information for patients and carers

Rituximab

What is Rituximab?

The immune system is the body's defense mechanism against infection. In certain illnesses this mechanism becomes inappropriately activated to target parts of the body. This type of illness is called an auto-immune disease.

Rituximab is a medication which will lower the activity of the immune system and begins to work within four to six weeks. Both are given as an infusion into a vein and target the same part of the immune system in a similar way. Both research studies and general experience have shown rituximab is very effective at treating different autoimmune conditions, including vasculitis and systemic lupus erythematosus, as well as other conditions such as some cancers.

How will treatment be given and monitored?

Initially you will have two doses, each given two weeks apart. If treatment is continued to help keep your disease under control, this will generally be given as an infusion every six months.

You will need a blood test 1-2 days before a planned dose and repeat bloods tests 14 days and 28 days after any dose is given. Prior to treatment being given, you will also have had routine blood tests to check for evidence of viral infections including hepatitis and HIV. Patients with undiagnosed hepatitis or HIV are at risk of reactivation or becoming unwell with rituximab treatment. In the event of a positive result your treatment plan will be reviewed with you by your doctor

What are the possible side effects of Rituximab?

As with all medications, side effects are possible but will not affect everyone. Some people have very few side effects while others may experience more. Serious side effects are very rare, and the benefits of treatment usually far outweigh the risks. The following are some of the potential side effects that can occur:

Flu like symptoms: This can often occur as a natural response of your body to the medication and can last for 7-10 days.

Infusion reactions: Occasionally some patients will experience other reactions to the infusion including sickness, headache, itching of the skin, rash, feeling flush, back pain, chest tightness or palpitations. To help minimise the chance of these symptoms occurring a single dose of steroid and an antihistamine are given as an injection before rituximab is administered. An infusion reaction does not mean future doses of rituximab cannot be given.

Low blood pressure: Uncommonly low blood pressure can occur during the infusion. Your blood pressure will be checked every 30 minutes while Rituximab is being given. If you take medicine to lower your blood pressure you may be asked to omit these on the day and the day before the infusion.

Infection: Rituximab works by suppressing your immune system which will place you at an increased risk of infection. There is a possibility of reactivation of viral infections such as hepatitis or cold sores. Extremely rarely, rituximab can cause a serious brain infection called progressive multifocal leuco-encephalopathy (PML). To reduce the risk of a certain type of chest infection you will also be started on a preventative antibiotic called co-trimoxazole.

Regular blood tests are checked to monitor for signs of potential infection

Cancer: As well as fighting infection, another job of the immune system is to detect and get rid of any potential cancerous cells in the body. The potential risk of cancer in the future goes up with any treatment that lowers the activity of the immune system. Following treatment with Rituximab, there is a very small risk of developing cancer in the future. This risk tends to be lower than other potential treatment options. To help reduce this risk, please participate in any national screening programmes offered to you for breast, cervical, prostate and bowel cancer. We also recommend that when out in the sun you use high factor sunblock and avoid sunbathing, to reduce the likelihood of skin cancers

Liver function: Rituximab can affect your liver function. However, this is not common and if this does occur any changes are usually temporary. Your liver function will be monitored as part of your routine blood tests.

Hair loss: Rituximab does not cause hair loss or thinning.

Fertility: Rituximab does not affect fertility

Pregnancy & breast feeding: It is not known if rituximab is safe or unsafe in pregnancy. Pregnancy and breastfeeding are not recommended during treatment and during the 6 months after finishing treatment. We also recommend the use of contraception while on treatment and for at least 6 months after treatment has stopped.

Can I take other medications while on Rituximab? Before starting a new medication, you should always tell the prescribing doctor that you are receiving Rituximab. Please check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any 'over-the-counter', herbal or complementary medicines.

Can I have vaccinations while on Rituximab? As Rituximab will weaken your immune system and ability to fight infection, it will also reduce the effectiveness of any administered vaccine. Live vaccines should be avoided while you are on treatment. We would advise you talk to your doctor before having any vaccinations.

Can I drink alcohol while taking Rituximab? Yes, in moderation and within current recommended safe limits.

What are the alternatives?

Based on your individual needs and understanding of the disease, your team have recommended treatment with Rituximab. Other medications may be considered depending on the disease being treated. There is also the option not to undertake any treatment. The lack of any treatment would carry a significant risk of uncontrolled disease and organ damage. In diseases that can affect multiple organs, such as vasculitis or systemic lupus erythematosus, there is the potential for death without treatment.

Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact the Renal department on telephone:

Sources of further information

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk

www.nhs.uk

www.accessable.co.uk

www.patient.co.uk

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/veteran-aware

<https://bepartofresearch.nihr.ac.uk/>

If you would like any further information or have any questions about your planned treatment, please speak with your consultant and treating team.

More information about vasculitis can be found on the Vasculitis UK and Versus Arthritis websites which are listed below.

The Northwest Vasculitis Support Group is made up of patients in the Lancashire region. They are a great source of patient support, also welcome family, friends and carers.

Vasculitis UK - www.vasculitis.org.uk

Versus Arthritis - www.versusarthritis.org

Northwest Vasculitis Support Group - nwvasculitis@outlook.com

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www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets

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If you want to stop smoking, you can also contact Smokefree Lancashire on Freephone **08081962638**

Please ask a member of staff if you would like help in understanding this information.

This information can be made available in large print, audio, Braille and in other languages.

Our patient information group review our leaflets regularly, if you feel you would like to feedback on this information or join our reading group please contact on email address:

patientexperienceandinvolvem@LTHTR.nhs.uk

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