



General information for patients receiving immunotherapy

Rutherford
Cancer Centres

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Introduction

You have been given this leaflet because your consultant or oncologist has prescribed immunotherapy to treat your cancer.

Your consultant or oncologist may recommend immunotherapy as the only treatment. Or it may be given after or at the same time as another treatment, such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy or proton therapy.

On your first visit to our centre you will be given an information leaflet on the treatment you are having. The treatment nurse will go through this with you in detail.

What is immunotherapy?

Immunotherapy, also called biological therapy, is a type of cancer treatment that boosts the body's natural defences to fight the cancer.

Immunotherapy may work by:

- Stopping or slowing the growth of cancer cells
- Stopping cancer from spreading to other parts of the body
- Helping the immune system work better at destroying cancer cells



Good to know:

Immunotherapy, also called biological therapy, is a type of cancer treatment that boosts the body's natural defences to fight the cancer.



What are the possible side effects of immunotherapy?

These types of immunotherapy drugs act on your immune system and may cause inflammation in parts of the body. It is important that any side effects are treated when they occur to stop them from getting worse. Some side effects begin during treatment, but they can sometimes happen months after the last treatment.

Possible side effects include:

- Inflammation of the stomach or intestines – leading to symptoms such as diarrhoea, stomach pain/cramps, blood or mucus in stools, feeling or being sick.
- Inflammation of the lungs leading to shortness of breath, dry cough, new chest pain.
- Persistent headaches, extreme tiredness, feeling faint, confusion, drowsiness.
- Skin rashes, mouth ulcers, itchy eyes.
- Inflammation of the eyes – causing blurred vision or double vision.
- Inflammation of hormone producing glands – causing underactive function of the thyroid and/or pituitary gland.
- Inflammation of the joints (arthritis).

- Inflammation of the nervous system – causing muscle weakness and numbness and tingling in the hands and feet.
- Inflammation of the pancreas – this can cause unstable blood sugars. You may experience increased thirst and increased urine output.
- Inflammation of the kidneys – you may notice a reduction in the amount of urine that you pass and it may appear darker in colour.
- Infusion-related allergic reactions – these include a high temperature, chills, shivering (rigors), a headache, and feeling sick. You must inform your treatment nurse immediately if you experience any of these symptoms during the infusion. Also, if you experience any pain at the cannula site during the infusion you must report this.
- Blood clot (thrombosis) – cancer can increase your risk of developing a blood clot, which may cause pain, redness and swelling in a leg, or breathlessness and chest pain. You must tell your doctor straight away if you have any of these symptoms.
- Fertility problems – some immunotherapy drugs possibly can damage women's ovaries and men's sperm. We actually do not know how much it affects fertility, but it may lead to infertility in men and women and/or early menopause in women. Some immunotherapy drugs may damage the development of a baby in the womb. It is important not to become pregnant or father a child while you are having treatment and for a few months afterwards. It is important to use effective contraception during and for several months after your treatment. You can talk to your doctor or treatment nurse about this.

Your treatment nurse will advise you on how to manage the side effects of your treatment.



Good to know:

We know that there is a lot of information to take in, so it can sometimes be useful to bring someone with you to your first appointment.

Tests during treatment

You will have blood tests before starting your treatment as well as during your treatment. We check your levels of blood cells and other substances in the blood. We will also check how well your liver and kidneys are working.

At the end of the treatment we will give you supportive medicines to take home, with instructions on how to take them.

The treatment nurse will also give you an alert card that has a 24-hr telephone number on should you feel unwell after your treatment or have any concerns about any of the symptoms listed above.

Practical issues

Cancer may affect your life in many ways. If you need help dealing with practical issues, our treatment team at the Rutherford Cancer Centre are here to provide support.

Whether it's care responsibilities, financial or housing concerns, work or education commitments, we make it our business to understand your needs and provide advice and resources to assist you in getting your life back on track.

Emotional issues

Being diagnosed with cancer can be overwhelming. You may feel scared and anxious, or you may experience many feelings that are difficult to process.

In addition, it is not always easy to know who to talk to. Knowing that the Rutherford Cancer Centres can provide empathic emotional support in living with cancer can help make the experience a little less frightening. This includes not only counselling or specific guidance, but also support from people who can just 'be there' for you throughout your cancer journey.

Beliefs and spiritual needs

At the Rutherford Cancer Centres, we believe good healthcare involves caring about the whole person, including their human rights and values.

To understand your spiritual needs, we may ask you questions such as: Do you have a religious faith? Or do you have any philosophy or a set of beliefs that gives your life meaning and purpose? How important is your faith to you? Are you part of a community that offers you support such as: a church, a mosque, temple or any other group of people you see regularly? How can we assist? Are there things we need to be aware of, e.g. prayer times, diet, etc? Can we contact anyone? What would best support you now?

If you feel you would like to address your religion and beliefs further, please see a member of the treatment team who will be able to connect you with the appropriate support.

Rutherford Cancer Centres

Rutherford Cancer Care Limited

0800 210 0402 | enquiries@therutherford.com | therutherford.com

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