

Subcutaneous Trastuzumab in Breast Cancer

This information sheet has been given to you to help answer some of the questions you may have about subcutaneous trastuzumab for breast cancer. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is trastuzumab (Herceptin)?

Trastuzumab is a targeted treatment that binds to HER2 (short for human epidermal growth factor receptor 2). HER2 is found on the surface of some cancer cells where it stimulates their growth. This type of breast cancer is known as HER2 positive disease. Trastuzumab is in a family of medicines called monoclonal antibodies. When trastuzumab binds to HER2 it stops the growth of these cells and causes them to die.

What is trastuzumab used for?

Your doctor may prescribe trastuzumab for the treatment of breast cancer if

- You have early-stage HER2 positive breast cancer, or if
- You have advanced or metastatic HER2 breast cancer (i.e. breast cancer that has spread beyond the breast and lymph nodes)

Trastuzumab may be prescribed in combination with other drugs for breast cancer, most commonly chemotherapy.

How is trastuzumab given?

There are two different ways to administer trastuzumab: one is administered into a vein (intravenous infusion) over 30 to 90 minutes, and the other as a subcutaneous injection (under the skin) over 2 to 5 minutes.

The subcutaneous preparation has recently become available. It offers a much quicker injection time and we think this will improve patient experience with less time spent on the chemotherapy ward/unit.

If you are already receiving trastuzumab intravenously you may be offered a switch to the subcutaneous injection.

If you are just about to start treatment you will be offered trastuzumab subcutaneously.

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Subcutaneous trastuzumab is given as a fixed dose of 600 mg regardless of your body weight, over 2 to 5 minutes, at three week intervals.

The injection site will be alternated between the left and right thigh. New injections will be given at least 2.5 cm from an old site.

The injection should not be given into areas where the skin is red, bruised, tender or hard. Please let the nurse know if you think this might be the case.

If other medicines for subcutaneous administration are used during treatment with trastuzumab, a different administration site should be used for those.

Where will my treatment be given?

Subcutaneous trastuzumab will be administered by a trained nurse in a facility designed for anti-cancer therapies; this is usually the chemotherapy day unit.

How long will I continue on trastuzumab?

Standard trastuzumab is given at 3 week intervals for 1 year in early-stage breast cancer, and until it stops working in advanced breast cancer.

Possible side effects

Trastuzumab can occasionally weaken the heart muscle and you will need to have a heart scan (either echocardiography or MUGA radionuclide scan) before starting treatment and at regular intervals during treatment to check that it is safe for you to receive trastuzumab.

Rare administration-related allergic reactions may occur such as chills, fever, breathing difficulties, low blood pressure, rash, headache, palpitations or irregular heart beat, feeling sick or being sick. You may notice these while the drug is given or shortly after, these side effects are most likely with the first dose, and are less likely with following doses.

Local reactions include redness or itching at the site of the injection.

Other less common side effects include diarrhoea, muscle or joint pain, high blood pressure and tiredness.

How will I be monitored?

You will be checked for any allergic reactions by a chemotherapy nurse during the administration and for six hours after the start of the first injection, and for up to two hours after the start of all subsequent injections for signs and symptoms of administration-related reactions.

Heart problems can sometimes occur during treatment and occasionally after you have completed treatment. Your doctor will monitor your heart function during treatment with a regular test called an echocardiogram or a MUGA but you should tell your doctor immediately if you notice any symptoms such as:

- breathlessness
- cough
- fluid retention (swelling) in the legs or arms
- palpitations or irregular heart beat

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Contact Details

Key worker:

Chemotherapy service telephone number:

During working hours (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm):

Out of Hours/ public holiday:

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