

# Information about your immunotherapy treatment for cancer

Cancer Services

Information for patients

Produced: Nov 2024

Review: Nov 2027

Leaflet number: 794 Version:2

## Emergency contact number

Please telephone the emergency number 0808 178 2212 at any time if you are unwell while on immunotherapy.

## Introduction

If you, or a member of your family, are about to start immunotherapy, you may have many questions.

This booklet aims to answer some of these questions, giving you general information about your treatment. Your oncology (cancer) doctor or nurse will be able to answer any specific questions or explain anything that you do not fully understand.

## What is immunotherapy?

Immunotherapy is a drug treatment for some types of cancer. Immunotherapy uses your immune system to fight cancer. It works by helping your immune system to recognise and attack cancer cells. You may receive immunotherapy on its own or with other cancer treatments.

## What is the immune system?

The immune system works to protect the body against infection, illness and disease. It can also protect us from the development of cancer. It is made up of the lymph glands, spleen and white blood cells. Usually your immune system can identify and destroy faulty cells in your body, and prevent cancer cells from developing. However, cancer may develop when:

- the immune system recognises cancer cells but is not strong enough to destroy these cells
- the cancer cells produce signals that stop the immune system from attacking them
- the cancer cells 'hide' or 'escape' from the immune system

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit [www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk) for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals  
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

## How will immunotherapy be given?

You will usually receive immunotherapy treatment through a drip into your bloodstream. However, some treatments are given as subcutaneous injections (injections given into the fat layer beneath the skin). Most immunotherapy is given once every three or four weeks.

## Does immunotherapy have any possible side effects?

Immunotherapy boosts all immune cells, not just the cells that target cancer and this can cause some side effects, including:

- tiredness (fatigue)
- dry, itchy skin or a skin rash
- diarrhoea/constipation
- abdominal (tummy) pains
- breathlessness and a dry cough
- fever and flu-like symptoms
- loss of appetite (occasionally feeling or being sick)
- problems with the normal working of the liver, kidneys and hormone-making glands, such as the thyroid

You are likely to have worse side effects if you are receiving more than one immunotherapy drug treatment or a combination of immunotherapy and chemotherapy. Some of these side effects, such as diarrhoea, can be serious if not treated quickly.

Before you start treatment, you will have a 'new patient talk', when we will discuss the possible side effects so you know what to look out for. Please write down any questions you might have so that you do not forget to ask them.

If you have any side effects or your symptoms get worse, or you have any other concerns about your treatment, please contact the 24-hour emergency helpline, so we can treat your symptoms as soon as possible.

Depending on the severity of your side effects, we may have to delay any further treatment by a week or so. If this is the case, we will discuss this with you.

You will need regular blood tests during your immunotherapy treatment to monitor your condition.

For some patients, the side effects of immunotherapy on the hormone-producing glands may be permanent and hormone replacement medicines are prescribed.

## What happens if I experience any side effects?

When you ring the 24-hour emergency helpline, you will be asked about your symptoms by an experienced chemotherapy nurse. Following this assessment, you will probably be asked to attend the Oncology and Haematology Assessment Unit (OHAU), so we can treat your symptoms as soon as possible. We may give you steroid tablets as part of your treatment.

If your symptoms worsen, you may need to be admitted to hospital for treatment with intravenous steroids (given via a drip). You may also need other medicines. This treatment will not affect how your cancer responds to immunotherapy treatment.

On rare occasions, we may have to stop immunotherapy treatment completely. If this is the case, your oncology doctor or nurse will explain the reasons for this with you.

## How will I know if the immunotherapy is working?

You will have regular scans or X-rays to monitor how your cancer is responding to the treatment. Immunotherapy does not work for everyone. However, most people do find that immunotherapy helps to shrink their cancer or at least prevents it increasing in size.

If you are prescribed steroids, please read the following information.

## What are the possible side effects of steroids?

### Common side effects

You may experience different side effects if you are having steroids with other medicines. However, the most common side effects include:

- an increased risk of infection
- changes in your blood sugar levels
- swollen hands and feet
- mood changes
- sleeping problems
- indigestion or heartburn
- increased appetite and weight gain

### Rare side effects

These side effects are rare (affecting less than one in 100 people):

- weaker bones
- eye problems
- high blood pressure
- your face becoming red and puffy
- muscle-wasting

If you have of these side effects whilst taking steroids, please tell your oncology doctor or nurse so they can help you to manage them.

## How should I take my steroid treatment?

Take your medicine as instructed by your doctor or nurse. They will explain how much to take and how often. Do not stop taking your medicine without talking to your doctor or nurse. You will need to reduce your dose gradually. Stopping suddenly can cause your adrenal gland, which makes important hormones for the body, to stop working and may make you unwell.

## Useful contact numbers (non-emergency)

For general enquiries about your immunotherapy, please call:

Chemotherapy Suite 0116 258 6107 (Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm)

Osborne Treatment Centre 0116 258 5263 (Monday to Friday 8am to 4pm)

## Useful links:

[www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancer-in-general/treatment/immunotherapy](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancer-in-general/treatment/immunotherapy)

[www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatments-and-drugs/immunotherapy](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatments-and-drugs/immunotherapy)

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں درکار ہیں، تو براہ کرم مندرجہ ذیل نمبر پر ٹیلی فون کریں۔  
على هذه المعلومات بلغة أخرى، الرجاء الاتصال على رقم الهاتف الذي يظهر في الأسفل  
જો તમને અન્ય ભાષામાં આ માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો નીચે આપેલ નંબર પર કૃપા કરી ટેલિફોન કરો

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਗਏ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ।

Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu

If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email [equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)