

Immunotherapy Medications: What you need to know

What is immunotherapy?

- Immunotherapy is a type of treatment that uses your body's immune system to fight cancer.
- Your immune system is made up of cells, tissues and organs that work together to fight infections and cancers.
- Immunotherapy treatments tell your body's immune system to attack and get rid of cancer cells.
- Once your immune system knows that the cancer is there, it starts to work hard to destroy your cancer cells.
- There are different types of immunotherapy treatments. Some examples are immunotherapy medications and immune cell therapies. This handout provides information on immunotherapy medications only.

Immunotherapy and chemotherapy are different

- Chemotherapy medications attack and get rid of cancer cells, but they also damage some healthy cells. This causes side effects like hair loss and vomiting.
- Immunotherapy medications do not damage healthy cells the same way that chemotherapy medications do.
- This means that immunotherapy medications usually cause fewer side effects than chemotherapy medications.

There are many immunotherapy medications

The most common type of immunotherapy medications used for treating cancer are immune checkpoint inhibitors. Some examples of immune checkpoint inhibitors are:

- Atezolizumab
- Avelumab
- Durvalumab
- Ipilimumab
- Nivolumab
- Pembrolizumab

These medications are used to treat many types of cancer, including some types of lymphoma, lung, kidney, and skin cancers.

Immune checkpoint inhibitor medications are given by injection (needle) into a vein (IV) or a needle under the skin.

Immune checkpoint inhibitor side effects

- When your immune system works harder than normal, you may have side effects in your bowels, skin, lungs, liver, kidneys, hormones, and other organs.
- Side effects from immunotherapy medications are usually mild, but they can become serious or life-threatening in rare cases.
- Some things to watch for are:
 - diarrhea
 - a new cough
 - problems with breathing
 - rash
 - any other new symptom
- If you have side effects, you must talk to your health care team right away. **You may need urgent treatment.**
- You may notice side effects during your treatment, or weeks to months after your treatment stops.

Managing side effects

- Side effects from immunotherapy medications are often managed with medications called corticosteroids. They may be pills you take by mouth or given to you through an IV.
- You may also need other medications, depending on which side effects you have.
- You may need to stop your immunotherapy treatment until your side effects get better.
- If the side effects are severe and cannot be managed, you may need to stop taking the immunotherapy forever. This is rare.
- For more details about side effects, please see the information sheet for the specific medication(s) you are taking.