Interferon Alpha - Information About Your Cancer Treatment

What is Interferon (in-ter-FEER-on) and how does it work?

Interferon belongs to the category of treatments called “biologic response modifiers,” also called immunotherapy. Interferon activates the body’s immune system to fight cancer.

What should I tell my doctor before my treatment?

Talk to your doctor about the following:

- If you have ever had treatment for your cancer and the name of the drugs you received.
- If you are pregnant or think you may become pregnant.
- If you are breastfeeding.
- If you have been told that you need to start a new medicine.
- The medicines/pills you are taking including:
  - Medicines prescribed by any of your doctors
  - Herbs
  - Vitamins
  - Over-the-counter medicines
- If you have ever had heart, liver, or kidney problems.
- If you have an active condition where your immune system attacks your body (autoimmune disease), such as ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease, lupus, or sarcoidosis.
- If you have had a history of depression, thoughts of suicide, or other mental health conditions.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

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How does my doctor decide my treatment dose?

To determine your treatment dose, your doctor will review the following: your height, your weight, your medicines, how well your heart, liver and kidneys are working, and any health problems you have.

The dose you receive is based on your height and weight and may be adjusted if you have had side effects from any other medicines used to treat your cancer.

How will my treatment be given?

Before your treatment, you will be given medicine to prevent a fever. Interferon is given directly into your blood stream through a tube (IV) placed in your arm or chest. Interferon comes in a bag with tubing attached. The nurse will connect the tubing to a pump. The treatment takes 20 minutes. You will receive 20 infusions of Interferon. It will be given 5 days a week for 4 weeks.

Your entire visit, including your doctor’s appointment and your treatment will take about 6 hours.

When you finish your first 20 infusions, you will begin a lower dose of this medicine at home. You will receive a subcutaneous injection (a sub Q shot) three times a week. Information about this treatment at home will be reviewed with you at your doctor’s appointment.

What are the side effects of this treatment?

Every person responds differently to treatment. Some of the more common side effects of this treatment are:

- Flu-like symptoms (chills, fever, aches)
- Fatigue
- Elevation of blood liver enzymes
- Abnormal blood test results (low calcium, high glucose, or high triglyceride levels)
- Weight loss
- Hair loss
Other less common side effects of this treatment include:

- These side effects may happen after the first few doses:
  - Nausea and vomiting (usually mild)
  - Diarrhea
  - Low blood pressure

- These side effects may last beyond your first few doses:
  - Cough
  - Depression, anxiety, irritability, or insomnia (not able to sleep at night)
  - Dry mouth
  - Skin rash, dry skin, itching
  - Dizziness
  - Abdominal pain
  - Numbness or tingling of hands or feet
  - Sweating
  - Taste changes
  - Constipation (not able to have a bowel movement)
  - Confusion, long-lasting sleepiness, memory loss
  - Swelling of feet and ankles
  - Joint or muscle pain

When should I call my doctor?

You should call your doctor right away if you have any of the following signs or symptoms:

- Shortness of breath, chest pain, rapid heart beat
- Depressed or having thoughts of hurting yourself or others
- Nausea that prevents you from eating or drinking, even after you have taken your anti-nausea medicine
- Vomiting (more than 4 to 5 times in a 24 hour period)
- Diarrhea (more than 4 to 6 times in a 24 hour period)
• Extreme fatigue (feel more tired than usual with or without activity)
• Blood in your urine or stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools
• Unusual bleeding or bruising
• A fever that does not go away
• Swelling of the feet or ankles, sudden weight gain

Is there anything else I should know about this treatment?

• Avoid sun exposure. Use SPF 30 (or higher) sunscreen and wear protective clothing.

• Do not get pregnant while taking Interferon.
  ▶ If you are a woman, talk with your doctor about what birth control to use.
  ▶ If you are a man, you must use a barrier method of birth control, such as a condom.

• You should drink 8 to 10 eight ounce glasses of non-caffeinated fluid each day throughout your treatment. It important to stay hydrated while you are receiving treatment.

• For flu-like symptoms, keep warm with blankets and drink plenty of liquids.

• You may experience drowsiness or dizziness. Until you know how you will react to this drug, do not drive or take part in activities that require you to be alert.

• Steroids may interfere with your treatment. Do not take any steroids by mouth or use them on your skin. Talk to your doctor before you take any new medicines.

For more information about cancer, treatment side effects or how to care for yourself during treatment, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

You may also find it helpful to watch The James Patient Education videos at http://cancer.osu.edu/patientedvideos to help you learn tips for managing treatment side effects.