

Rituximab (MabThera)

Rheumatology Department Patient Information Leaflet

What is rituximab?

Rituximab is an antibody designed to work directly on the immune system by reducing the number of a certain type of blood cell (white cells/ lymphocytes, known as B cells). These blood cells are one of the many cells and chemicals that cause inflammation in the body.

What are the benefits?

This medication has been proven to greatly reduce the signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis and has also been used occasionally in severe systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) and vasculitis.

How is rituximab given?

Rituximab is given as an intravenous infusion. This is a simple procedure that is routinely performed at Russells Hall Hospital in the day case unit.

The infusion involves inserting a small narrow needle (called a venflon) into your arm, through which the rituximab is given. Rituximab is usually given in combination with the medicine methotrexate.

How often will I have the infusion?

You will be given a course of two 1000mg infusions, two weeks apart. The course will be repeated when symptoms of your rheumatoid arthritis start to return, which is usually in about nine to 12 months. The infusions cannot be given less than six months apart.

How long will it take for rituximab to work?

It can take up to three months for rituximab to help reduce the signs and symptoms of the disease.

Will I have any side effects?

All medicines can cause side effects and rituximab is no different. The main side effect is a reaction to the infusion (see section 'Will I have a reaction to the infusion?'). Other side effects that can occur are changes in blood pressure, diarrhoea, indigestion, cramp, dizziness, tingling or numbness, anxiety or nervousness, cough, watery or itchy eyes, sweating, sinusitis and blood test abnormalities.

As rituximab reduces the number of white cells in the blood, this can mean you are more likely to get certain infections and your consultant will discuss this with you in more detail. Rituximab may increase the risk of hepatitis B being reactivated in people who carry the virus so you will be checked for certain hepatitis viruses before treatment. Again your consultant and/or specialist nurse will discuss this with you.

What if I develop a serious infection?

If you have a chronic infection or a history of recurring infection, please inform both your GP and rheumatologist. Also tell your GP if you develop an infection whilst receiving rituximab.

Will I have a reaction to the infusion?

During the infusion, or within two hours of the first infusion, you may develop fever, chills and shivering. To try and prevent infusion reactions such as these, you will be given some paracetamol, an antihistamine tablet (which reduces allergy symptoms) and a moderate dose of steroids intravenously (into your vein) before the rituximab infusion.

Occasionally in some patients the infusion may cause blisters, itching, sickness, tiredness, headache, breathing difficulties, swelling of the tongue or throat, an itchy runny nose, flushing or palpitations.

If you have heart disease or angina, this may worsen if you develop an infusion reaction. If you experience any discomfort during the infusion, let the nurse know immediately. The nurse may simply slow down or temporarily stop the infusion as reactions generally stop quickly.

What happens during the infusion?

The infusion process has five steps:

1. You will have your blood pressure, pulse and temperature taken.
2. You will be given the paracetamol and antihistamine tablets.
3. You will receive the steroid infusion which takes 30 to 60 minutes.
4. You will then be given the rituximab infusion over a two-hour period. During this time you will have your blood pressure, pulse and temperature taken at regular intervals.
5. After the infusion is complete, it is recommended you to stay in the day case unit for a further two hours to ensure that there are no side effects.

Can I drive after the infusion?

Yes. The infusion does not cause drowsiness and you should be able to continue with your normal activities.

Can I take other medicines?

It is important that you always let any doctor treating you know that you are receiving rituximab and methotrexate. Little is known about possible drug interactions with rituximab but some drugs interact with methotrexate which may cause problems.

Will I need any special tests?

Yes, you will need to have blood tests and be screened for certain hepatitis and chicken pox viruses before the treatment begins.

If you are being treated with methotrexate, you will already be having regular blood checks. It is important that these continue.

Can I have rituximab if I am planning to start a family?

Women who are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant, and those who are breastfeeding, should not receive rituximab. Women of childbearing age must use adequate contraception to prevent pregnancy and continue its use for at least twelve months after the last rituximab treatment.

Men who are on methotrexate as well as rituximab should avoid fathering a child for at least three months (and some doctors advise six months) after stopping treatment, as methotrexate can affect sperm and therefore a fertilised egg.

Do I need to take any other precautions?

It is recommended that you have a pneumococcal vaccine before starting the treatment and this should be repeated every five to 10 years. It is also advisable to have an annual flu jab.

You should avoid live vaccines; these include rubella, shingles and certain polio vaccines. Always let the doctor/nurse giving you the vaccination know that you are being treated with rituximab and methotrexate.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

Rheumatology helpline on 01384 244789 (this is an answer machine so please do not use this helpline in an emergency) or speak to your pharmacist

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dudleygroup.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/rheumatology/>

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

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Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru va rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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