

What you need to know about Adalimumab (Humira) and the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease

What is my medicine?

Adalimumab has the trade name Humira and is used for people with active Crohn's disease who have tried standard treatments (such as mesalazine, prednisolone, and azathioprine) and continue to have severe symptoms, or who have developed fistulae (a passage between loops of bowel and the skin or other organs such as the bladder). It is also used for people who have had a reaction or not responded to infliximab.

How does it work?

Adalimumab interrupts the inflammatory process that occurs in Crohn's disease by blocking a protein called 'tumour necrosis factor-alpha' which is thought to be increased in patients with active disease. This allows healing of the lining of the bowel and closure of fistulae in most cases.

How is Adalimumab given?

Adalimumab is given by an injection into the fatty tissue of your stomach or leg. Your pulse and blood pressure will be recorded every thirty minutes for two hours after the injection. Normally you will be able to go home after this.

We will give you either two or four injections in the first treatment, depending on the severity of your disease. This will be followed by one or two injections 2 weeks later, followed by one injection every two weeks. The length of treatment will depend on how effective it is at controlling your disease.

You will usually attend the hospital as a day case about four times, during which time the nurse specialist will teach you how to self-inject. Once you are confident about doing this, arrangements will be made for you to have the treatment at home.

Can I take other medicines?

Adalimumab can be taken with most other medication, except a drug used in rheumatoid arthritis called anakinra. You must not have live vaccines whilst taking adalimumab - if you need any vaccinations please check with the doctor that is treating you first. It is important to tell your doctor or nurse specialist of any medication you are currently taking, including those bought over-the-counter.

Will I need to have any tests before having the infusion?

Before having each injection you will need to have a number of blood tests. This is to ensure that your liver is functioning well and also to check your blood count and inflammatory markers. You will also be asked to have a chest x-ray and a special blood test before the first treatment to check for tuberculosis. Your doctor may advise other tests before starting the treatment.

If you have a fistula, you may need to have a scan to detect any abscesses or collections, as these will need to be treated before you can start your treatment.

What side effects does the treatment have?

The common side effects (around 1 in 100) of treatment with adalimumab include:

- Headache
- Injection site reaction (pain, swelling, rash)
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Infections of the chest / throat/ urinary tract

- Dry skin / rash
- Increased sweating
- Joint pains

Some people can have an allergic reaction to adalimumab, although this is very rare. If an allergic reaction does happen it can cause shortness of breath, raised pulse or blood pressure. If this happens treatment will be discontinued and you will be given drugs to reverse the effects.

Very rarely, people have developed serious infections after treatment with adalimumab. If you develop any symptoms of infection such as raised temperature, flu-like symptoms you should tell your doctor straight away.

You must not have any active infection at the time of treatment. It is therefore essential that you inform the doctor or nurse specialist of any sore throat, cold, recent chest or urinary infection, abscess or other infection before the treatment date.

There is some evidence to suggest that people who are treated with immunosuppressant drugs may be more prone to developing a type of cancer called lymphoma which affects the lymph glands. There have been a few reported cases in patients with Crohn's disease treated with this drug but the overall risk remains very small.

It is important to remember that adalimumab is a relatively new drug, therefore the long term safety and possible side effects are not fully known.

Can I drink alcohol while taking adalimumab?

Yes, it is safe to drink alcohol with this medicine.

Will it have an effect on fertility or pregnancy?

The risks of adalimumab to the unborn baby are unknown. Women of child-bearing age must use contraception whilst on the drug and for at least 6 months after the last treatment. Women should not breast feed while on adalimumab.

What if I have any other questions?

If you have any further questions about your treatment please contact the inflammatory bowel disease specialist nurses during office hours:

Sister Kay Greveson & Sister Elaine Cronin k.greveson@nhs.net / elaine.cronin@nhs.net

Tel: 020 7830 2283

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