

Rituximab

What is Rituximab?

It is a drug that switches off a part of your immune system that is working incorrectly. This causes the disease process to slow down. It can be used in many conditions such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, SLE (Lupus), ILD, Vasculitis, Myositis and certain Cancers. This is a very expensive treatment and is prescribed only by specialists in cases where other medications are not working.

How is it given?

Rituximab is given in a drip into a vein, which is usually administered over 2 to 4 hours. Usually, you will receive the drips with a second drip 2 weeks later. The medication takes almost 6 weeks to work and reaches its peak effect after 3 months. Depending on your response, you may receive another dose after 6 or 9 months, or if the disease flares.

Are there complications from Rituximab?

A few people experience a fever, wheeziness, a rash or fall in blood pressure while they are having the infusion, or shortly afterwards. If you start to feel unwell while you are having the infusion, let the person giving you the infusion know so they can slow it down. If your symptoms are bad, you may need to stop the treatment, but this is rare.

Infections

Rituximab affects your immune system, which can make you more likely to pick up infections. Tell your doctor or rheumatology nurse straight away if you develop any new symptoms that concern you. This could be a sore throat, fever or other signs of infection.

To protect you from infections, you should receive the Influenza vaccine every year (4 weeks before the drip), and pneumococcal vaccine every 5 years. Before getting rituximab you will be checked for infections such as hepatitis, TB and HIV with blood tests and a chest X-ray. Rituximab can make any of these problems worse.

Other things to know

- Very rarely, patients treated with rituximab can develop a serious condition called progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy (PML), which can damage the brain and spinal cord. You will need to see your doctor straight away if you have any of the following: pins and needles, weakness, shaky movements, sight loss, speech problems, changes in mood. PML has only affected a very small number of people who have been treated with rituximab.
- Please tell your doctors if you plan to fall pregnant within 1 year of this treatment.

Where do I get more information?

- The SA arthritis foundation (www.arthritis.org.za, 021 425 2344) is the charity leading the fight against arthritis, and offers online or telephone advice. Talk to your rheumatologist and rheumatology nurse by phoning during clinic times ((021) 404 5394 (Friday) or 5313 (Thursday)).