

# Rituximab

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## Information for patients and carers from the Haematology Department

### Why have I been prescribed Rituximab?

You have been prescribed Rituximab because you have either immune thrombocytopenia (ITP) or autoimmune haemolytic anaemia (AIHA). These are disorders in which your body's immune system attacks your healthy cells.

Although Rituximab is not licensed for these disorders, there is good evidence that it can help to treat them.

### How does Rituximab work?

Rituximab reduces the activity of the immune system. It is often used instead of steroids, which can have long term side effects. Rituximab usually takes longer to work than steroids. It can often take several weeks before it starts to take effect.

### How is Rituximab given?

Rituximab is given as an infusion through a drip (a small tube or cannula directly into a vein in your arm). It is given once a week for four weeks and will take a few hours each time.

### What are the possible side effects of Rituximab?

There are a number of possible common side effects with this drug, which include the following.

- **Allergic reaction**

Some people have an allergic reaction to Rituximab. This can happen while it is being given or for up to two hours afterwards. Allergic reactions are most common with the first infusion. You will be given drugs before the infusion to reduce the chance of an allergic reaction. Allergic reactions are usually mild, although rarely they can be more severe. If you have an allergic reaction, the nurses can usually treat this by slowing or stopping the drip. The rest of your treatments will be given at a slower rate to minimise the risk of any further reaction.



The nurses will check you for signs of an allergic reaction, but always tell your nurse or doctor if you have any of the following symptoms.

- Flu-like symptoms such as a headaches, feeling flushed, having a fever, chills, or dizziness.
- Feeling sick.
- A rash or you feel itchy.
- Breathlessness, wheezing, or a cough
- Pain in your back, stomach, or chest
- Feeling unwell.

Rarely, people may have a reaction a few hours after their treatment. If you do develop any of these symptoms or feel unwell after you get home, contact the hospital straightaway for advice.

- **Changes in blood pressure**

Some people's blood pressure falls while they are having Rituximab. If you usually take medicine to lower your blood pressure, your doctor may ask you not to take it for 12 hours before taking Rituximab. More rarely, Rituximab can make your blood pressure go up. Your nurse will check your blood pressure regularly during your infusion, to monitor any changes.

- **Risk of infection**

If you have a low number of white blood cells, you are more likely to get an infection. If you have a low white blood cell count during your treatment, your doctor or nurse will advise you how to reduce your risk of infection.

- **Raised blood sugar levels**

Rituximab may raise your blood sugar levels. Symptoms of raised blood sugar include feeling thirsty, needing to pass urine more often than normal, and feeling tired. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have these symptoms.

If you have diabetes, your blood sugar levels may be higher than usual. Your doctor will talk to you about how to manage this.

- **Diarrhoea or constipation**

You may have diarrhoea, constipation, or stomach pain. Your doctor can prescribe drugs to help with these problems. Make sure you drink at least two litres (three and a half pints) of fluids every day if you have diarrhoea or constipation.

- **Skin changes**

Rituximab may cause a rash, which can be itchy. You may also notice unusual feelings in your skin, such as numbness, tingling, pricking, or burning. Rarely, skin reactions can be more severe. Tell your doctor about any skin changes you notice. Your doctor can give you advice and may prescribe creams or medicines to help. Any changes to your skin are usually temporary and will improve when treatment with Rituximab finishes.

- **Muscle and/or joint pain**

You may get pain in your joints or muscles. Tell your doctor if this happens, so they can prescribe painkillers. Tell your doctor if the pain does not get better. Try to get plenty of rest. Taking regular warm baths may help reduce any pain.

- **Eye problems**

Your eyes may become watery. Your doctor can prescribe eye drops to help with this. Always tell your doctor or nurse if you notice any changes in your vision.

- **Effects on your nervous system**

Rituximab can affect your nervous system. You may feel anxious or restless, have problems sleeping, or experience dizziness whilst having this medication. Tell your doctor or nurse straightaway if you notice any of these symptoms.

It is important not to drive or operate machinery if you notice these effects.

- **Effects on your lungs**

Rituximab can cause changes to your lungs. Always tell your doctor if you notice wheezing, a cough, fever, or if you feel breathless. You should also let them know if any existing breathing problems get worse. If necessary, they can arrange for you to have tests to check your lungs.

### **Less common side effects of Rituximab**

There are also some less common side effects with this drug, which include the following.

- **Changes in the way your heart works**

If you already have heart problems, Rituximab may make them worse. Your doctor might do tests to see how well your heart is working before you start taking Rituximab. Let your doctor know if you have chest pain, difficulty breathing, or swollen ankles.

- **Hepatitis B reactivation**

If you have had Hepatitis B (a liver infection) in the past, Rituximab can make it active again. Your doctor or nurse will talk to you about this and test you for Hepatitis B before prescribing Rituximab. If you have active Hepatitis B you cannot be treated with Rituximab.

- **Hearing problems**

Rarely, Rituximab may affect your hearing. Tell your doctor if you notice ringing in your ears (tinnitus), or if you have other hearing changes or pain in your ear after you start taking Rituximab. These changes will improve when your treatment finishes.

### **What should I do if I have any side effects?**

If you experience any signs of infection, such as a high temperature above 37.5°C, a sore throat, or cough, you should contact your GP or pharmacist immediately. Tell them your symptoms and that you are being treated with Rituximab.

You should also seek medical attention if you develop side effects such as unexplained bruising, bleeding, shortness of breath, excessive tiredness, yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes, or severe itching (which can be signs of liver damage).

If you come into close contact with anyone who has chickenpox or shingles, please tell your GP as soon as possible.

### **Will Rituximab interfere with my other medicines?**

Before you start any new medicines, you must check with your doctor or pharmacist whether they might interact with Rituximab, especially those that are not prescribed by a doctor (such as over the counter medication or herbal remedies).

It is safe to drink alcohol in moderation whilst on Rituximab, but this may make any diarrhoea and nausea you may have worse.

### Should I still have vaccinations?

Seasonal vaccination against influenza is recommended for people of any age who have been given Rituximab, as is the vaccination with the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine against pneumonia. Rituximab does not appear to increase the risk of contracting influenza, but the illness can be more severe if you catch it whilst the effects of this treatment are still in your system.

You should avoid having live vaccines during treatment with Rituximab, and for at least six months afterwards. These live vaccines include BCG (tuberculosis), yellow fever, measles, mumps, rubella, liquid typhoid, poliomyelitis, and MMR (combined measles, mumps, and rubella).

### What about using contraception and getting pregnant?

Your doctor will advise you not to become pregnant or to father a child during treatment with Rituximab, as it may harm a developing baby. It is therefore important to use effective contraception during, and for 12 months after, treatment with Rituximab. You should discuss this with your doctor or nurse.

### Can I breastfeed while taking Rituximab?

There is a possible risk that Rituximab may be in breast milk, so women are advised not to breastfeed during this treatment and for at least six months afterwards.

### Does taking Rituximab effect fertility?

It is not known what effects Rituximab may have on your ability to have children in the future. If you have concerns about fertility, it is important to discuss them with your doctor before beginning treatment.

### Where can I find more information?

For more information, the best person to speak to is your doctor (haematologist or GP).

**This leaflet has been produced with and for patients**

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**Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments** please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 78 31 45, or email [ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net)

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