

# Tocilizumab



Singapore  
General Hospital  
SingHealth

## About your medicine

- Tocilizumab belongs to a new class of medicines called biological disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (biological DMARDs).
- These medicines block natural substances called cytokines, which are found in excessive amounts in the blood and joints of people with rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, juvenile arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis.
- The increased levels of cytokines cause inflammation, which results in symptoms of pain, joint swelling and stiffness, and can lead to joint damage.
- By blocking the cytokine called interleukin-6 (IL-6), tocilizumab reduces inflammation, lessens the symptoms and can help reduce joint damage.

## How is the medicine given?

- Tocilizumab is given as a drip (infusion) into the vein.
- The infusion normally takes one hour and is followed by a period of observation for at least one hour to make sure you do not have any side effects.
- Tocilizumab is usually given once every 4 weeks.
- Dosing is based on weight, so each person's dose may differ.
- Tocilizumab may be used with other arthritis medicines including:
  - Other DMARDs such as methotrexate
  - Steroids such as prednisolone
  - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
  - Over-the-counter pain medicines such as paracetamol

### **How long does it take for the medicine to be effective?**

- Unlike many standard DMARDs, tocilizumab works relatively quickly.
- You may notice some relief of joint swelling, pain and stiffness within the first 8 weeks of treatment.

### **What should I do if I forget a dose?**

- If tocilizumab treatment is stopped for more than a few weeks there is a risk that your condition will get worse again.
- Continue with your treatment unless advised by your doctor or side effects develop.
- If you stop tocilizumab for any reason you must contact your doctor.

### **Do I skip dose if I am sick?**

- Seek prompt advice from your doctor when you develop an infection.
- Your doctor will decide whether to stop tocilizumab on a case-by-case basis.

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

- Most common possible side effects:
  - Infusion reactions (e.g. fever or chills, itch, dizziness, headache, chest pain, shortness of breath or changes in blood pressure). These effects are more likely to occur during the first or second infusion and can usually be reduced by taking steroids, antihistamines and paracetamol before the treatment.
  - Headache or cough
  - Stomach or bowel discomfort
  - Skin effects (e.g. rash, dermatitis and itching)
  - Reversible elevation of liver enzymes
  - Increase in cholesterol level
  - Mild infections (e.g. colds)
- Less common or rare possible side effects:
  - Decrease in white blood cell count, platelet count
  - Serious infections (e.g. tuberculosis)
  - Perforations of the stomach or gut
  - Serious allergic reactions including anaphylaxis which can be life-threatening
- The impact on the development of malignancies is not known and treatment may result in an increased risk of malignancies. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns about issues relating to cancer risk.
- Do not consume if you have concerns about any of these possible side effects.

## When do I seek immediate medical attention?

- See your doctor straight away if you experience any of the following:
  - Serious infections
  - Severe stomach or bowel discomfort
  - Serious allergic reactions

## What should I do when I am taking the medicine?

- If you have an active infection of any kind, treatment with tocilizumab will not be given until the infection is treated successfully.
- Tocilizumab is not suitable for patient with active, untreated tuberculosis or HIV infection, as it is likely to worsen these conditions.
- If you have latent (inactive) tuberculosis, you need to undergo preventive anti-tuberculosis treatment before starting the tocilizumab infusion.
- Hepatitis B or C patients may undergo this treatment.
- Laboratory tests will be conducted before commencing treatment with tocilizumab due to risks associated with infection.
- Blood tests will be required during your treatment to monitor your condition and to determine the effectiveness of treatment.
- You should receive pneumococcal and seasonal flu vaccinations to reduce risk of infections.
- If you require surgery for any reason, treatment may be stopped before surgery and restarted again after the surgery at a time determined by your surgeon and doctor.
- Avoid overcrowded places.

## Can I take other medicines or supplements?

- It is recommended you should not be immunised with 'live' vaccines such as MMR (measles, mumps and rubella), OPV (oral polio virus), BCG (Bacillus Calmette Guerin) or yellow fever when you are taking tocilizumab. Talk with your doctor before receiving any vaccines.
- Tocilizumab can interact with other medicines. You should tell your doctor about all medicines you are taking or plan to take. This includes over-the-counter or herbal medicines.
- You should also mention your treatment when you see other healthcare professionals.
- Over-the-counter pain medicines (e.g. paracetamol) can be used while you are receiving tocilizumab treatment provided you take them as directed.

## What special dietary instructions should I follow?

- You may drink alcohol while taking tocilizumab.
- However, since you are likely to be also taking methotrexate, it is recommended that alcohol intake be limited as much as possible.
- Do not consume raw or undercooked food.

## Can I start a family or breastfeed?

- Not enough information is known regarding the possible effects of tocilizumab on pregnancy in humans. If you plan to become pregnant, it is important to discuss this with your doctor.
- You should not breastfeed when taking tocilizumab.

## How should I store the medicine?

- Tocilizumab is usually given at the hospital's premises, therefore you do not need to store the medicine at home.

## In Summary

### What you need to know about tocilizumab?

- Review your progress regularly with your doctor to ensure treatment is working and minimise any possible side effects.
- If you stop tocilizumab for any reason you must contact your doctor.
- If you are worried about the side effects or stopped taking tocilizumab due to any other reasons, contact your doctor as soon as possible.
- Tell your doctor if you have had cancer or developed cancer while you are taking tocilizumab.
- For patients who intend to start a family, consult your doctor before you start the treatment.
- If you have any questions about the treatment, please discuss it with your doctor/advanced practice nurse at 65762418 or Pharmacist at 63265077.

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Reg. No.: 198703907Z  
Information correct as at August 2016

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Printing supported by

