

Maintenance Therapy in Lymphoma

Overview

Maintenance therapy refers to the ongoing treatment of patients whose disease has responded well to first-line treatment. More and more cancer treatments have emerged that are effective at forcing cancer into remission (meaning there are no identifiable symptoms or signs to indicate the presence of cancer). Maintenance regimens have been developed to keep the cancer in remission.

Maintenance therapy typically consists of non-chemotherapy drugs given at lower doses and longer intervals than when they are given during initial therapy. Depending on the type of lymphoma and drugs used, maintenance therapy may last for weeks, months, or even years. Interferon, purine analog agents (eg, pentostatin, cladribine), and targeted immunotherapy with rituximab (Rituxan) have been used as maintenance therapy in various lymphomas. Rituximab is often recommended as maintenance therapy in patients with many different forms of non-Hodgkin lymphoma who have responded to treatment. Rituximab has been shown to increase the length of remission in patients with lymphoma, regardless of whether they have been previously treated or this was their first treatment course.

Although the drugs used for maintenance treatments generally have fewer side effects than chemotherapy, patients may still experience adverse events from these treatments. Your doctor will consider all of your clinical circumstances before determining your initial treatment (induction therapy) and whether you would benefit from maintenance therapy versus retreatment or “watch and wait” (checking for recurrence with no treatment).

Maintenance therapy has mainly been used in the indolent non-Hodgkin lymphoma sub-types like follicular lymphoma, but is currently also being looked at in other subtypes of lymphomas.

Questions you can ask your oncologist to help you better understand

the role of maintenance therapy in your treatment course:

- Is maintenance therapy an option for me?
- Why are you recommending maintenance therapy?
- What are the benefits and risks?
- How often and for how long will I receive this treatment?
- Does my insurance cover this treatment?
- Is this better for me than retreatment or “watch and wait”?

Treatments Under Investigation

Many new drugs are being studied in clinical trials as maintenance therapy, alone or as part of a combination therapy regimen, including:

- Bortezomib (Velcade)
- Brentuximab vedotin (Adcetris)
- Lenalidomide (Revlimid)
- Vorinostat (Zolinza)

It is critical to remember that today’s scientific research is continuously evolving. Treatment options may change as new treatments are discovered and current treatments are improved. Therefore, it is important that patients check with LRF or with their physician for any treatment updates that may have recently emerged.

Clinical Trials

Clinical trials are crucial in identifying effective drugs and determining optimal doses for lymphoma patients. Patients interested in participating in a clinical trial should talk to their physician or contact LRF’s Helpline for an individualized clinical trial search by calling (800) 500-9976 or emailing helpline@lymphoma.org.

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Follow-up

Patients in remission should have regular visits with a physician who is familiar with their medical history as well as with the treatments they have received. Medical tests, such as blood tests and computed axial tomography (CAT) scans, may be required at various times during remission to evaluate the need for additional treatment.

Some treatments can cause long-term effects or late effects, which can vary based on duration and frequency of treatments, age, gender, and overall health at the time of treatment. Doctors will also check for these effects during follow-up care.

Patients and their caregivers are encouraged to keep copies of all medical records and test results as well as information on the types, amounts, and duration of all treatments received. This documentation will be important for keeping track of any effects resulting from treatment or potential disease recurrences.

Support

A lymphoma diagnosis often triggers a range of feelings and concerns. In addition, cancer treatment can cause physical discomfort. Support groups and online message boards can help patients connect with other people who have lymphoma. One-to-one peer support programs, such as LRF's Lymphoma Support Network, match lymphoma patients (or caregivers) with volunteers who have gone through similar experiences.

Resources

LRF offers a wide range of resources that address treatment options, the latest research advances, and ways to cope with all aspects of lymphoma. LRF also provides many educational activities, from in-person meetings to teleconferences and webcasts. For more information about any of these resources, visit the website at www.lymphoma.org or contact the Helpline at (800) 500-9976 or helpline@lymphoma.org.