



Interferon therapy

This leaflet provides you with information about interferon therapy. Please take time to read it and contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

What is interferon?

Interferon is a naturally occurring substance which is produced by the body's immune system during an illness such as viral infection and 'flu. It is sometimes referred to as "biological therapy" or "immunotherapy". Your consultant has recommended treatment with interferon alpha for your type of cancer.

Why have I been prescribed interferon?

Interferon is used to treat renal cancer and carcinoid tumours, and occasionally other cancers. Please note that interferon is not always the right treatment for all patients with these cancers. Your consultant will decide if it is appropriate.

Are there any side effects?

The **main** side effects of interferon are lethargy (tiredness), flu-like symptoms (aching in the joints and raised temperature), depression (low mood), nausea (feeling sick), myelosuppression (reduction in the amount of new blood cells produced by your bone marrow), anorexia, and diarrhoea. These symptoms usually improve after the first few injections. Your doctor or nurse clinician will be happy to discuss the possible side-effects in more detail.

You may also have skin irritation at the injection site. This can be reduced by giving the injections of interferon in different places. Tell your nurse or doctor if an injection site becomes red, tender and warm as these can be signs of infection.

Can the side effects be treated?

The 'flu-like symptoms are often eased by taking paracetamol and/or ibuprofen approximately one hour before the injection. You can increase the number of tablets you take, the maximum dose is written on the label. Nausea can usually be treated very successfully with tablets or other methods. You will have a blood count checked at each visit so that we can monitor the amount of new blood cells being produced in your bone marrow. It is important that you tell us about any side effects that you have, so that we can help to improve these.

Medical or dental treatment

If you need to go into hospital for any reason other than cancer treatment, always tell the doctors or nurses that you are taking interferon. Tell them the name of your cancer doctor so they can ask for advice. **Always tell your dentist you are taking interferon.**

How is interferon given?

Interferon is given by a subcutaneous injection three times a week. This means that the injection goes just below the skin, and the needle is very small. Sometimes a special injection "pen" is used to make injections easier. This is very easy to use and most people give

themselves their own injections. However, we understand that you may not want to do this and we can therefore arrange for your district nurse to administer the injection for you. **If you forget to take your injection – tell your doctor. Do not take a double dose.**

We usually advise that injections are given either in the stomach area or thigh. We will give you advice about this before starting treatment. As mentioned earlier you may develop skin irritation at the injection site.

We will give you a 'sharps bin' so that all used needles and pens can be safely stored and disposed of. When this is full you can return it to the hospital and it will be replaced with an empty one.

How should interferon be stored?

It should be stored in a fridge (at 2°C to 8°C) away from food, preferably in a plastic container. As with all medicines, please ensure that young children are not able to gain access to it.

How long can I remain on interferon?

This depends on the individual and there is no time limit on treatment. As long as you are benefiting from interferon and not having unacceptable side effects, you can remain on treatment for many months or years. Your condition will be monitored very closely when you attend the clinic and you will also have regular investigations such as CT scans to assess how you are responding to treatment. If your doctor decides to stop the treatment, return any remaining injections to the pharmacy. **Do not throw them away.**

Useful contact numbers

If you have any questions, or wish to discuss this information further, please contact:

- Christina Nuttall, Upper G.I. Nurse Clinician **0161 446 8099**
- Prof Juan Valle, Senior Lecturer in Medical Oncology **0161 446 8106**
- Dr Richard Hubner, Consultant Medical Oncologist **0161 446 8199**
- Dr Was Mansoor, Consultant Medical Oncologist **0161 446 3209**
- Professor Peter Trainer, Consultant Endocrinologist **0161 446 3664**

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

We try to ensure that all our information given to patients is accurate, balanced and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **patient.information@christie.nhs.uk**

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For more information about The Christie and our services, please visit **www.christie.nhs.uk** or visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford.

Contact The Christie Hotline for urgent support and specialist advice

**The Christie Hotline:
0161 446 3658**

Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Christie NHS Foundation Trust
Wilmslow Road
Withington
Manchester M20 4BX
Tel: 0161 446 3000
www.christie.nhs.uk

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