

Rituximab for aggressive non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

**Understanding NICE guidance –
information for people with
non-Hodgkin's lymphoma,
and the public**

September 2003



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Understanding NICE guidance – information for people with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and the public

Issue date: September 2003

Review date: September 2006

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Web: www.nice.org.uk

ISBN: 1-84257-374-8

Published by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence
September 2003

Typeset by Icon Design, Eton

Printed by Abba Litho Sales Limited, London

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What is NICE guidance?

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is part of the NHS. It produces guidance (recommendations) on the use of medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic tests and clinical and surgical procedures within the NHS in England and Wales.

To produce this guidance, NICE looks at how well the medicine, equipment or procedure works and also how well it works in relation to how much it costs. This process is called an appraisal. The appraisal process involves the manufacturer of the medicine or equipment for which guidance is being produced and the organisations that represent the healthcare professionals, patients and carers who will be affected by the guidance.

NICE was asked to look at the available evidence on the use of rituximab to treat aggressive non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and to provide guidance that will help the NHS in England and Wales decide when rituximab should be used.

What are non-Hodgkin's lymphomas?

Non-Hodgkin's lymphomas are types of cancer of the lymphatic system. The lymphatic system is a network of vessels that drain fluid from around the body and return it to the blood. It is also an important part of the immune system, which fights infections in the body.

There are different types of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The type a person has depends on the type of cell from which the cancer starts, the signs and symptoms of their cancer and the way that the cancer develops.

The guidance NICE has issued about rituximab applies to people with types of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma that, as a group, are known as diffuse large-B-cell lymphomas. These types of lymphoma can spread quite quickly, and they are called 'aggressive' lymphomas. The B cells (or 'B lymphocytes') are types of white blood cell that develop in the bone marrow (which is inside bones) and then either stay in the bone marrow or move to sites in the lymphatic system.

With non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the normal stages of division and repair of the B cells get out of control. As a result, too many B cells are produced.

How the cancer spreads

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma can spread through the body because the cancer-forming cells can be transported through the lymphatic system and through the blood system. In the lymphatic system, the cells can collect at the lymph nodes ('glands'). These nodes are found in groups along the lymphatic system. If the cancer-forming B cells collect at a lymph node, a cancerous lump ('tumour') may grow in the node. The cancer-forming B cells can also get carried in the blood to other parts of the body where they can start to form new tumours.

Stages of the cancer

Doctors use a system called 'staging' to describe how far a cancer has spread. For diffuse large-B-cell lymphomas, there are four stages.

- Stage 1, where the cancer is in a single group of lymph nodes.
- Stage 2, where the cancer affects two or more groups of lymph nodes, but they are on one side of the diaphragm only. (The diaphragm is a large flattish muscle that lies under the lungs – above the diaphragm is the top half of the body and below it is the lower half. So this stage means that the cancer hasn't spread from one half of the body to the other.)

- Stage 3, where the cancer is in groups of lymph nodes on both sides of the diaphragm.
- Stage 4, where the cancer has spread to other parts of the body, such as the lungs or the bone marrow.

Standard treatment

For many years, the standard treatment for diffuse large-B-cell lymphomas has been chemotherapy using a combination of medicines called cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, vincristine and prednisolone (this combination is usually abbreviated to CHOP). (Chemotherapy is the name given to treatment with medicines that aim to target cancer cells and stop them from growing and dividing in the body.)

What is rituximab?

Rituximab is a specially made antibody that has been designed to recognise the cancer-forming B cells. (The part of the cells that it recognises is called CD20 – when people are tested for non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, they are tested to see whether their B cells have CD20.) When the antibody ‘locks on’ to one of the B cells, it causes a number of different things to happen with the end result that the cells dies. Rituximab also seems to make the chemotherapy medicines work more effectively.

Rituximab is put straight into the bloodstream through a drip.

What has NICE recommended on the use of rituximab?

NICE has made the following recommendations about the use of rituximab to treat aggressive non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma within the NHS in England and Wales.

NICE has recommended that rituximab and the CHOP combination of chemotherapy medicines should be the first treatment considered for people with diffuse large-B-cell lymphoma that is at stage 2, 3 or 4 (see above). (These people should have CD20 on their B cells – see above.)

Rituximab is not recommended for people who are unable to have chemotherapy with the CHOP combination.

NICE has said that rituximab should only be used in people with diffuse large-B-cell lymphoma in stage 1 if they are being treated as part of a clinical study. This is because, at present, there isn't enough evidence that rituximab works well or that it works well enough considering its cost in this group of people for it to be used routinely.

The last recommendation from NICE is that treatment with rituximab and CHOP should be supervised by a doctor who has specialised in the treatment of lymphomas.

What should I do next?

If you or someone you care for has non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, you should discuss this guidance with your doctor.

Will NICE review its guidance?

Yes. The guidance will be reviewed in September 2006.

Further information

The NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) has further information about NICE and the full guidance on rituximab for aggressive non-Hodgkin's lymphoma that has been issued to the NHS. The guidance can also be requested from the NHS Response Line by phoning 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference number N0284.

If you have access to the Internet, you can find more information about non-Hodgkin's lymphoma on the NHS Direct website (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk). You can also phone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.



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