

Infliximab Therapy for Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)

Infliximab Therapy for IBD

Your inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) health care provider thinks that treatment with infliximab may help you manage your IBD.

This pamphlet has basic information about infliximab. It can help you choose whether to use this treatment. It does not replace your IBD health care provider or pharmacist's instructions or information.

What is IBD?

- In IBD, your immune system cannot tell the difference between foreign (from outside your body) substances and your body's own tissues. This can cause:
 - › Bowel inflammation (swelling)
 - › Bowel ulcers (sores)
 - › Diarrhea (loose, watery poop)
 - › Pain
- IBD is usually treated with medications that:
 - › Lower inflammation
 - › Suppress (lower) the immune system

What is infliximab?

- Infliximab is a **biologic medication**. A biologic medication is a special medication that treats inflammation.
- Tumour necrosis factor (TNF) is a part of your immune system involved in chronic (long term) inflammation. It is a big part of what causes your IBD symptoms.
- Infliximab is an anti-TNF medication. It:
 - › Suppresses your immune system
 - › Lowers the inflammation in your bowel
 - › Improves your symptoms

How long will I need to take infliximab?

- Infliximab can take up to 4 months to work well. Your IBD health care provider will check how you are responding to the medication and decide if it is right for you.
- You can check if the medication is working by keeping a record of your IBD symptoms. Your IBD health care provider can also do the following tests:
 - › Stool (poop) sample
 - › Colonoscopy (scope of the bowel)

- Your IBD health care provider may want you to stay on infliximab long term (years) to treat your IBD if:
 - › The medication is helping your IBD symptoms
 - › You are not having any major side effects

How much does infliximab cost?

- Infliximab can cost thousands of dollars a month.
- A Patient Support Program is available to help with the cost of this medication. They will work with your insurance company or Nova Scotia Pharmacare. Any part of the cost that is not covered by your insurance or Pharmacare may be paid for by the Patient Support Program.
- A nurse coordinator for the Patient Support Program will stay in contact with you and your IBD health care providers. They will help you with any forms that may be needed to cover the cost of this medication.

How do I use infliximab?

- Infliximab is given by intravenous (I.V.) infusion. It is given through a small, flexible tube put into a vein in your arm. The infusion takes around 2 hours.
- During the infusion, nurses with specialized training in this treatment will monitor (check) you for any side effects (like an allergic reaction). They will treat any side effects right away.
- Once you have been taking infliximab for a while and feel well during your treatments, you may be able to have the infusion over a shorter time.
- When you start treatment, you will get an infusion:
 - › In your 1st week of treatment
 - › At 2 weeks
 - › At 6 weeks

After your 3rd transfusion, you will then get an infusion every 8 weeks.

- You will have your infusions in a private infusion clinic in your area.

- Each time you have an infusion, a report will be sent to your IBD health care provider with:
 - › Your weight
 - › Your dose (amount)
 - › Information on how you are doing
- You can also get infliximab as a subcutaneous (under the skin) injection. After your first 3 I.V. infusions, you would inject yourself at home once every 2 weeks. A nurse would teach you how to do this. If you are interested in this, talk with your IBD health care provider.

Before you start taking infliximab

- Before taking infliximab, there are things you can do to lower your risks and help the treatment work better.
- You will have tests to check for active infections, like:
 - › Blood tests
 - › A tuberculosis (TB) skin or blood test
 - › A chest X-ray

- Your IBD health care provider may want you to update your vaccines for:
 - › Tetanus
 - › Hepatitis
 - › Pneumonia (lung infection)
 - › Shingles
- **If you have other health problems, they may get worse while taking infliximab. Tell your IBD health care provider about any other health problems you have, like:**
 - › Allergies to certain medications
 - › Chronic or recurrent (keep coming back) infections
 - › Blood conditions
 - › History of or exposure to TB
 - › Hepatitis B virus or carrier
 - › Active cancer or a history of cancer
 - › Congestive heart failure (CHF)
- **Do not get any live vaccines (vaccines that have a weakened form of a virus in them, like MMR) while taking infliximab.** You are at a higher risk of infection from the virus.

- If you are due for vaccines or plan to be vaccinated, tell your IBD health care provider. It is safe to get the yearly influenza vaccine (flu shot) and COVID vaccines while taking infliximab.
- **Do not start taking any new medications.** Medication interactions (how they affect each other) may increase your risk of serious side effects. **Ask your IBD health care provider or pharmacist about possible complications before starting a new medication.**
- Have regular blood tests and regular check-ups with your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner).
- **It is important to tell your IBD health care provider if you are, or are trying to get, pregnant.** Tests have not shown any harmful effects on pregnancy while taking infliximab.
- Infliximab **does not** pass into your breast milk. It is safe to breastfeed or chestfeed your baby.

What are the possible side effects of infliximab?

- Like any medication, infliximab has possible side effects. Most people do not have any side effects. Sometimes, people have flu-like symptoms, like:
 - › Fever (temperature above 38 °C or 100.4 °F)
 - › Chills
 - › Headache
 - › Dizziness
 - › Muscle aches
 - › A change in blood pressure
 - › Itching
 - › Flushing (skin and/or face feels warm and turns pink, red, or darker in colour)
 - › Sweating
 - › Skin rash
 - › Wheezing
 - › Chest pain
 - › Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
 - › Nausea (upset stomach)
 - › Vomiting (throwing up)
- These side effects can usually be helped with medication. If medication does not help, or if your symptoms get worse, the health care team will stop the infusion.

- **Other possible side effects include:**
 - › Respiratory (breathing) infections (for example, in the lungs)
 - › Stomach (belly) pain
 - › Hives (raised, itchy spots)
 - › Fainting
 - › Muscle pain
 - › Unusual tiredness or weakness
- **Less common symptoms include:**
 - › Nasal congestion (stuffy nose)
 - › Runny nose
 - › Coughing
 - › Sore throat
 - › Sneezing

**Call 911 or go to the nearest
Emergency Department right away
if you suddenly have any of these
symptoms:**

- › Shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- › Chest pain
- › Anaphylaxis (a life-threatening allergic reaction where you stop breathing)

Higher risk of infection

- Anti-TNF medications like infliximab work by lowering the immune responses that cause your IBD symptoms, but they also lower other immune responses. This means you may have a higher risk of infection.

There is a very small chance of getting an infection that could cause death.

- Some people on infliximab have had infections. These range from a cold to more serious infections which could cause death, like:
 - › Pneumonia
 - › Tuberculosis (TB)
 - › Other bacterial, fungal, and viral infections
- **If you think you have an infection, visit your primary health care provider or go to a walk-in clinic. It is important to tell them that you are taking infliximab.**
- If you get an infection while taking infliximab, tell your IBD health care provider. They will tell you if you should delay your infliximab treatment and when you should start it again. They will also tell the infusion clinic. If the infection becomes serious, your treatment may be stopped.

Are there any other risks of taking this medication?

Symptoms of lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus [SLE])

- A small number of people on infliximab have symptoms of SLE. These people had abnormal blood test results with autoantibodies (antibodies that attack your own body).
- When these people stopped taking infliximab, their blood tests went back to normal and their SLE symptoms went away.
- Tell your IBD health care provider if you have any of these symptoms of SLE:
 - › Chest discomfort or pain
 - › Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
 - › Joint pain
 - › Rash on your cheeks or arms that gets worse in the sun

Cancer

- A very small number of cases of lymphomas (blood cancers), including a cancer that can cause death, called hepatosplenic T-cell lymphoma, have been reported in people on infliximab.
- These types of cancers happen in about 6 out of every 10,000 people who take infliximab. This risk may be higher if you are also taking other medications that affect or suppress your immune system.

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

What should I do if I have side effects?

- If you have any serious side effects, or you have side effects that do not go away, tell your IBD health care provider right away. You may have to lower your dose or stop taking infliximab. They will make changes to your medication, if needed.
- There are other medications that can help you manage the symptoms of these side effects.
- **It is important to talk with your IBD health care provider as soon as you have any changes in your side effects.** This will help you and your IBD health care provider pick the treatment that is best for you.
- **It is very important that your IBD health care provider checks your progress at regular visits to make sure this medication is working the right way.** You will also need regular blood tests. Talk to your IBD health care provider about when they will follow up with you by phone or in-person.

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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