

# Maintenance Therapy in Lymphoma



## WHAT IS MAINTENANCE THERAPY?

Maintenance therapy refers to the ongoing treatment of people whose disease has responded well to treatment (sometimes called 'induction'). An increasing number of treatments have emerged that have shown to be effective at keeping 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. They are usually started within the first 6 months following initial treatment to keep lymphoma from progressing or recurring.

## LENGTH OF DURATION OF MAINTENANCE THERAPY

Depending on the type of lymphoma and the drugs used, maintenance therapy may last for weeks, months, or even years. Not all people are recommended to have maintenance therapy if their lymphoma is under control after induction treatment. Rituximab (Rituxan or Mabthera) is a targeted immunotherapy that is often recommended as maintenance therapy in patients with many different forms of non-Hodgkin lymphoma (NHL). These people have usually received rituximab as part of their induction therapy, most commonly in combination with chemotherapy. If the lymphoma responds to initial treatment, rituximab may be recommended to be continued as 'maintenance therapy'. The rituximab in the maintenance phase is administered once every 2–3 months. Rituximab is currently given for a maximum period of 2 years, although clinical trials are testing whether there is any benefit in maintenance treatment continuing for longer. For maintenance therapy, rituximab may be given intravenously (by injection into a vein) or subcutaneously (by injection under the skin). Alternatively, obintuzumab (Gazyva) is another monoclonal antibody that is also used for maintenance for patients with follicular lymphoma post chemotherapy with obintuzumab, administered every 2 months for 2 years.

## WHO IS GIVEN MAINTENANCE THERAPY?

Maintenance rituximab has mainly been used in the indolent NHL sub-types like follicular lymphoma and mantle cell lymphoma, but is currently also being looked at in other subtypes of lymphomas. Children and young people with lymphoblastic lymphoma may be given maintenance treatment with chemotherapy to prevent their lymphoma relapsing. This is a less intensive course of

chemotherapy and is usually given as an outpatient over a couple of years. Rituximab is not currently approved for use in children.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF MAINTENANCE THERAPY?

Rituximab has shown to increase the length of remission in people with lymphoma, regardless of whether they have been previously treated or this was their first treatment course. There are many newer treatments for lymphoma that are being trialled for their use as maintenance therapy to reduce the risk of the lymphoma relapsing (coming back). The introduction of maintenance therapy in the treatment of indolent lymphoma represents a proactive approach to prolong remission rather than waiting to treat them when the disease has relapsed.

New hope for lymphoma is always on the horizon. Data has shown that relapses can be delayed or even prevented, by continuing or 'maintaining' treatment with rituximab while people are in remission. The goal is to prevent those people who have responded to initial treatment from relapsing while ultimately improving overall survival.

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH MAINTENANCE THERAPY?

Although the drugs used for maintenance treatments generally have fewer side effects than combination chemotherapy, people may still experience adverse events from these treatments. Your doctor will consider all of your clinical circumstances before determining your initial treatment and whether you would benefit from maintenance therapy versus another treatment or 'watch and wait'.

Some of the possible side effects of maintenance Rituximab are:

- Allergic reaction
- Lowering effects on blood cells. You will have regular blood tests done to check the numbers of blood cells
- Headaches or flu like symptoms
- Fatigue or tiredness
- Skin changes. Rituximab may cause a rash, which can be itchy. You may also notice unusual feelings in your skin such as numbness, tingling, pricking or burning

## TREATMENTS UNDER INVESTIGATION

Many new individual and combination therapies are being trialled around the world for their use in maintenance therapy for lymphoma. Some of these drugs include:

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

Scientific research is continuously evolving. Treatment options may change as new treatments are discovered and treatment options are improved. It is important to check with your Haematologist or Oncologist for any treatment updates that may have recently emerged.

## RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

| Organisation       | How can they help?   |
|--------------------|--|
| Lymphoma Australia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lymphoma Australia offers a wide variety of resources and support for people with lymphoma or CLL and their carers. Please visit our website <a href="http://www.lymphoma.org.au">www.lymphoma.org.au</a> for further information</li> <li>• Lymphoma Australia videos on the YouTube channel: <a href="http://bit.ly/2VBOblX">http://bit.ly/2VBOblX</a></li> <li>• Lymphoma Nurse Support Line: 1800 953 081 or email: <a href="mailto:nurse@lymphoma.org.au">nurse@lymphoma.org.au</a></li> <li>• Online private Facebook group: Lymphoma Down Under <a href="http://bit.ly/316t3Wk">http://bit.ly/316t3Wk</a></li> </ul> |
| Beyond Blue        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beyond Blue provide phone, online and email support for those experiencing high levels of depression, anxiety, stress or suicidal thoughts. Call 1300 22 4636 or visit: <a href="http://www.beyondblue.org.au">www.beyondblue.org.au</a></li> </ul>   |
| Cancer Council     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cancer Council offers a range of services to support people affected by cancer, their families and friends. Services may vary depending on where you live. Visit: <a href="http://www.cancer.org.au">www.cancer.org.au</a> or call 13 11 20</li> </ul>  |
| Gather My Crew     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather My Crew connects people going through tough times with friends and family who want to provide practical help: <a href="http://www.gathermycrew.org.au">www.gathermycrew.org.au</a></li> </ul>  |

| Organisation                                 | How can they help?  |
|--|---|
| CanTeen                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CanTeen is an organisation working with young people affected by cancer 12-25 years, including those whose parents have cancer. They have resources, online support chat rooms, phone and face to face counselling as well as fun events and camps. There is also online support available for parents. <a href="http://canteen.org.au">canteen.org.au</a> or email <a href="mailto:support@canteen.org.au">support@canteen.org.au</a> or call 1800 835 932</li> </ul> |
| Headspace                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phone and face-to-face counselling for those affected by mental health issues aged between 12-24 years. Call: 1800 650 890</li> </ul>  |
| Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre (ACSC) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ACSC is a unique service based at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Victoria. It provides a comprehensive collection of resources and information for cancer survivors and their carers: <a href="http://bit.ly/2njl5kc">http://bit.ly/2njl5kc</a></li> </ul>   |
| Medicare Australia                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check with your GP if you are eligible for a Mental Health Treatment Plan (MHTP). This plan can give you up to 10 sessions with a registered psychologist either significantly or completely subsidised by Medicare. For more information visit: <a href="http://bit.ly/31ahL36">http://bit.ly/31ahL36</a></li> </ul>  |
| WeCan  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WeCan is an Australian supportive care website to help find the information, resources and support services they may need following a diagnosis of cancer. Visit <a href="http://wecan.org.au">wecan.org.au</a></li> </ul>   |

## SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

- 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?
- What type do you recommend?
- Is this better for me than being re treated or "watch and wait"?

This resource was last reviewed and updated October 2019