

# Immunotherapy side effects

The purpose of this leaflet is to explain about immunotherapy treatment and the possible side effects. If you have any questions after reading this leaflet, please ask a member of the nursing team or your keyworker.

## About immunotherapy

The immune system recognises dangerous organisms, such as bacteria, and attacks them to prevent them from causing harm; this process is called an **immune response**. As cancer cells often find ways to disguise themselves or mutate (change), the immune system does not always recognise them as dangerous. Immunotherapy works by activating the immune system so it can recognise cancer cells and destroy them.

There are many different types of immunotherapy, and there are new treatments becoming available. Immunotherapy might be given by itself or in combination with other cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy, targeted therapies or radiotherapy. Your treatment will vary depending on the immunotherapy drugs you are having.

## Side effects and complications

Our specialist Immuno-Oncology Team provide advice and care for people who develop side effects or complications from immunotherapy (known as '**toxicities**'). They also run special clinics for these patients.

If you feel unwell while on immunotherapy, let your clinical team know or contact the 24-hour Advice Line so we can adjust your care and help you stay well enough for your treatment. If needed, they can refer you to the Immuno-Oncology Team.

Occasionally, the immune system responds in an uncontrolled way to immunotherapy which can cause side effects. You might not get any side effects, but if you do, it is important to report them immediately because you might need treatment to prevent the problem from becoming more serious.

### General Side effects

- Feeling more tired or confused
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling shivery or cold
- New or persistent headaches
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Change in your appetite
- Changes in your mood, feeling more anxious or irritable

- A loss or gain in weight
- Eyes become red or watery
- Pins and needles; leg weakness; issues with walking

### Gastro/Stomach

- Feeling nauseous and/or vomiting (very rare)
- An increase in bowel movement and/or diarrhoea. Any change in bowel habit should be taken seriously
- Blood, watery or foul-smelling stools
- Cramping pains

### Breathing/lungs

- A new or worsening cough
- Changes in your breathing
- Feeling more short of breath

### Skin

- A yellow tinge to your skin
- A skin rash or your skin is itchy - this may be confined to one area or all over your body
- Bleeding or bruising
- Sweating more than usual

### Glands

Some of the glands that produce hormones become inflamed, such as the thyroid gland; this leads to the glands becoming underactive. Glands will be checked regularly by blood test. Sometimes hormone replacement therapy in the form of tablets may be required. General symptoms of gland issues may include:

- Lack of energy or motivation (fatigue)
- Muscle weakness
- Low mood
- Loss of appetite and unintentional weight loss
- Weight gain
- Increased thirst
- Constipation
- Loss of libido (sex drive)
- Dry and scaly skin
- Brittle hair and nails
- Pain, numbness and a tingling sensation in the hand and fingers
- Sensitivity to cold

### Heart and chest

Immunotherapy can affect how the heart works. This is not common, but it can be serious. You may have tests to check how well your heart is working. These may be done before, during and after treatment.

**Contact the hospital straight away on the 24-hour Advice Line if you have any of these symptoms during treatment or after treatment ends:**

- Breathlessness
- Dizziness
- Changes to your heartbeat
- Swollen feet and ankles

Other conditions can cause these symptoms, but it is important to get them checked by a doctor.

### **Always call 999 if you have:**

- chest pain
- pressure, heaviness, tightness or squeezing across the chest or difficulty breathing

## **Treatment of toxicities**

Management of immunotherapy related toxicities can often be done in the community, from your own home or as a day attendance review at the hospital. The sooner you report issues, the sooner we can initiate treatment and try and control the toxicities.

Steroids are often used to treat toxicities, however, you will be guided through what is required throughout your reviews and ongoing treatment. Occasionally Immunotherapy treatments are required to be put on hold whilst the toxicity is being managed.

If the toxicity is severe and requires hospital admission, you will be reviewed frequently by the Acute Oncology Team or your specialist nurse to help support you through the toxicities. There are occasions when we may have to refer patients onward to specialist teams, such as gastroenterologist, dermatologist, cardiologist (depending on the toxicity) but they will liaise throughout with the Acute Oncology Team to ensure we are doing the best we can for you.

## **Further information and support**

### **Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre, Lister Hospital**

Situated at the main entrance to the Lister Hospital.

Drop-in centre and telephone helpline for any questions relating to cancer:

- Telephone 01438 284657 (Monday to Friday, 10am - 4pm, excluding Bank Holidays)
- Email - [macmillaninfosupport.enh-tr@nhs.net](mailto:macmillaninfosupport.enh-tr@nhs.net)

### **Macmillan Cancer Support [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)**

Specialist advice and support for people with cancer and their families.

- Telephone 0808 808 0000

## **Useful contact details**

### **East and North Hertfordshire Teaching NHS Trust:**

- Website [www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk](http://www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk)
- Telephone 01438 314333

### **Acute Oncology 24-hour Advice Line:**

- Telephone 07827 823509
- Email – [aoscomms.enh-tr@nhs.net](mailto:aoscomms.enh-tr@nhs.net)

## Leaflet information

You can request this information in a different format or another language;  
please speak to your doctor or nurse.

**Date of publication:** July 2025

**Version number:** 01

**Author:** T Maryan

**Reference:** Cancer Services

**Review Date:** July 2028

© East and North Hertfordshire Teaching NHS Trust  
[www.enher-ts-tr.nhs.uk](http://www.enher-ts-tr.nhs.uk)