

# Interferon Alpha - Information About Your Cancer Treatment

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## What is Interferon (in-ter-FEER-on) and how does it work?

Interferon alpha is one type of interferon that belongs to the category of treatments called “biologic response modifiers,” also called immunotherapy. Interferon activates the body’s immune system to fight cancer.

## What should I tell my healthcare provider before my treatment?

Talk to your healthcare provider about the following:

- If you have ever had treatment for your cancer and the name of the drugs you received.
- If you are pregnant or think you may become pregnant.
- If you are breastfeeding.
- If you have been told that you need to start a new medicine.
- The medicines/pills you are taking including:
  - Medicines prescribed by any of your doctors
  - Herbs
  - Vitamins
  - Over-the-counter medicines
- If you have ever had heart, liver, or kidney problems.
- If you have an active condition where your immune system attacks your body (autoimmune disease), such as ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease, lupus, or rheumatoid arthritis.
- If you have changes in your ability to think clearly.
- If you have had a history of depression, anxiety, thoughts of suicide, or other mental health conditions.

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**This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.**

## **How does my doctor decide my treatment dose?**

To determine your treatment dose, your doctor will review the following: your height, your weight, your medicines, how well your heart, liver and kidneys are working, and any health problems you have.

The dose you receive will be adjusted if you have any side effects.

## **How will my treatment be given?**

This medicine is a shot given just under the skin (subcutaneous injection). This shot is usually given in the belly, upper arm or thigh. You and your caregiver can be taught how to do this shot at home.

Take your interferon alpha injection at bedtime.

## **What are the side effects of this treatment?**

Every person responds differently to treatment. Some of the more common side effects of this treatment are:

- Flu-like symptoms (chills, fever, headaches, body aches)
- Low blood counts
- Fatigue or drowsiness
- Elevation of blood liver enzymes
- Weight loss or loss of appetite
- Hair loss or thinning

## **Other less common side effects of this treatment include:**

- Redness or pain where the shot was given
- These side effects may happen after the first few doses:
  - Nausea and vomiting (usually mild)
  - Diarrhea
- These side effects may last beyond your first few doses:
  - Dizziness
  - Depression, cloudy thinking, memory loss, or anxiety, irritability, or insomnia (not able to sleep at night)
  - Dry mouth, sore throat

- ▶ Taste changes
- ▶ Skin rash, dry skin, itching
- ▶ Cough
- ▶ Abdominal pain
- ▶ Constipation (not able to have a bowel movement)
- ▶ Numbness or tingling of hands or feet
- ▶ Sweating
- ▶ Weakness
- ▶ Joint or muscle pain

### When should I call my healthcare provider?

You should call your healthcare provider **right away** if you have any of the following signs or symptoms:

- **A fever of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) or higher**
- Shortness of breath, chest pain, rapid heart beat
- Depressed or having thoughts of hurting yourself or others
- Nausea or vomiting that prevents you from eating or drinking, and does not get better after you have taken your anti-nausea medicine
- Diarrhea (more than 4 times in a 24 hour period)
- Extreme fatigue (feel more tired than usual with or without activity)
- Blood in your urine or stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools
- Unusual bleeding or bruising
- Swelling of the feet or ankles, sudden weight gain

### Is there anything else I should know about this treatment?

- You may have chills after your injection. Make sure to have blankets and a hat with you.
- You may experience drowsiness or dizziness. Until you know how you will react to this drug, **do not** drive or take part in activities that require you to be alert.
- Avoid sun exposure. Use SPF 30 (or higher) sunscreen and wear protective clothing.

- **Do not get pregnant while taking Interferon.**
  - ▶ If you are a woman, talk with your doctor about what birth control to use.
  - ▶ If you are a man, **you must** use a barrier method of birth control, such as a condom.
- You should drink 8 to 10 eight ounce glasses of non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated fluid each day throughout your treatment. It is important to stay hydrated while you are receiving treatment.
- Do not start any new supplements, prescribed or over the counter medicines until you talk with your healthcare provider.
- Steroids may interfere with your treatment. **Do not** take any steroids by mouth or use them on your skin. Talk to your doctor before you take any new medicines.

For more information about cancer, treatment side effects or how to care for yourself during treatment, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

You may also find it helpful to watch The James Patient Education videos at <http://cancer.osu.edu/patientedvideos> to help you learn tips for managing treatment side effects.