



Trastuzumab (Herceptin) in Early Breast Cancer

Patient Information sheet

What is Herceptin, and how does it work?

- Herceptin is the trade name of a drug called Trastuzumab
- It is a type of medicine for patients with HER-2 positive breast cancer
- It attaches to HER-2 cancer cells and stops them growing

What is HER – 2 positive breast cancer?

HER -2 is a protein which is found in unusually large amounts on the surface of some breast cancer cells. Your doctor calls this over-expression. This over expression of HER-2 makes cancer cells grow more quickly and means that HER-2 positive cancer is a more aggressive form of breast cancer.

Who can benefit from Herceptin?

- Only patients who have HER2 positive breast cancer.
- All patients diagnosed with breast cancer from 1st October 2005 will now be routinely tested to find out if they are HER-2 positive and can benefit from Herceptin
- Around 25% of breast cancer are HER 2 positive
- Patients who are not HER2 positive or who were treated by surgery alone and did not need chemotherapy will not benefit from Herceptin.

What is the potential benefit in using it as soon as breast cancer is diagnosed and not yet spread to other parts of the body?

- In the trials conducted so far, the risk of a recurrence after 2 years was reduced by approximately half. Risk of recurrence depends on a number of factors such as the size of the tumour and involvement of lymph nodes under the arm and you doctor will be able to make an individual assessment of your risk".
- We know that when patients did **not** have Herceptin, the breast cancer returned within 2 years in around 2 in every 25 patients.
- Patients who **had** Herceptin for 1 year, the cancer only returned in 1 in 25 patients.

But the trials have not been running long enough to be certain that it reduces the likelihood of the cancer returning for ever. Nor have the long term risks of using the drug been evaluated.

- Herceptin can cause allergic reactions, these reactions can usually be safely treated by stopping the infusion of Herceptin and giving additional medicines but some times the reaction can be life –threatening.
- Herceptin can weaken the heart muscle, leading to problems pumping the blood around your body. Before starting Herceptin treatment you would need a special heart scan to check the function of your heart. This scan is repeated every 3 months during your treatment to make sure it is not affecting your heart. If it does, your treatment will stop.
- 1 in 60 patients did not complete their Herceptin treatment because they developed problems with their heart.
- For 1 in 200 patients the problem with their heart was very serious and they encountered problems (tiredness, shortness of breath, chest pain) with simple activities of daily life.
- We do not know if the effect on the heart is reversible although it is certainly treatable.
- About 1 in 20 patients who received Herceptin had some reduction in the strength of their heart muscle.
- Herceptin can also cause inflammation of the lining around your heart and make the rhythm irregular.

If you develop any chest pain, fluid retention (swollen ankles or arms), or palpitations (heart fluttering or irregular heart beat) you must tell your doctor immediately.

What is the legal status of Herceptin?

- Every company that sells a medicine is required to hold a Product Licence.
- The company that sells Herceptin in the UK has applied for a Product Licence in early breast cancer. However, this licence has not yet been granted.
- The Product Licence is only granted when the regulatory authorities are satisfied that the drug is effective and the benefits of the medicine outweigh any likely side effects.
- Not having a license for early breast cancer means that the company that makes Herceptin is unlikely to be found legally responsible for any harm caused by that medicine when used in early breast cancer.

Is Herceptin available on the NHS?

- Herceptin for advanced breast cancer has been available on the NHS for 3 years and all patients with advanced breast cancer would normally be tested to check if it is suitable for them.
- Until recently, Herceptin was not available on the NHS for early breast cancer. However, the two cancer networks in the North of England announced in November 2005 that even though it is not yet licensed, they were recommending that suitable patients should be offered Herceptin. If you want to know if you would be suitable for Herceptin you should discuss this with your Oncologist.
- The available information about Herceptin changes regularly. Please check with your Oncologist, Nurse or Pharmacist that this information is still up to date.

Additional information

Breast Cancer Care is a national organisation offering support and information to those who are affected by breast cancer. They have produced a number of booklet/leaflets that are free to patients. Information is available by post (see telephone number below) or can be found on the following website

<http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/publications/booklets/7590>

Telephone: 0808 800 6000

Cancer BACUP is a registered charity providing information about all aspects of cancer as well as emotional support for cancer patients and their families. They have produced a number of booklets that are free for patients.

www.cancerbacup.org.uk

Telephone: 0808 800 1234

The Northern Cancer Network provides basic and easy to understand information on aspects of interest to cancer patients, their families, friends and carers.

www.cancernorth.nhs.uk

They have also set up, in partnership with Macmillan Cancer Relief, Information and Support Centres with a Manager and trained volunteers to give support and advice.

Northern Cancer Network 31 January 2006.

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Disclaimer

31 January 2006. The information provided in this fact sheet is intended to answer frequently asked questions from patients and carers about Herceptin. However any views or options presented are solely those of the Northern Cancer Network and do not necessarily represent NHS policy both nationally and locally or the views of the PCT's. Patients are advised that the situation regarding access to Herceptin can change and should discuss any concerns with a member of their Health care Team for the most up to date information.