

Information for patients about  
**Intravenous Immunoglobulins  
(IVIg) in Neurology**

Neurology Department  
Southern General Hospital  
1345 Govan Road  
Glasgow  
G51 4TF  
Telephone Number: 0141 201 2487

## **What is Intravenous Immunoglobulin (or IVIg)?**

Immunoglobulins are substances produced naturally by the body's immune system to fight off infections. They are more commonly known as 'antibodies'. We have found that by giving these substances through the veins (i.e. intravenously) they can help in the treatment of certain diseases of the nerves and muscles. At the Southern General Hospital we have a lot of experience in using this treatment for neurological disease.

## **Who gets them?**

IVIg is often helpful for "autoimmune" diseases – which are diseases where the body's immune system attacks the body. Some of these diseases affect the nervous system (brain, nerves and muscles). Conditions which are often treated with IVIg include:

- GBS (Guillain-Barré Syndrome)
- CIDP (Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyradiculoneuropathy)
- Myasthenia Gravis
- Dermatomyositis
- Multifocal Motor Neuropathy
- Lambert-Eaton Myasthenic Syndrome
- Stiff Person syndrome

There are also other rarer conditions that may benefit from this treatment. Your neurologist will help you decide if this treatment is appropriate for you. You may also hear of IVIg being used in the treatment of some autoimmune diseases of the skin, joints and blood.

## **How do they work?**

It is not clear exactly how IVIg works, but we do know that it prevents the cells and molecules of the immune system from attacking the body's own tissues. By dampening down the autoimmune process, we hope to stop the disease getting worse and improve symptoms.

## **How are they given and how often?**

IVIg is given into a vein (via a drip) over several hours. You will be in hospital for this if you are not already. Usually this treatment is given in Ward 68 at the Southern General Hospital. The nurses will monitor your blood pressure, pulse and temperature during this time. We will also make sure that you are feeling well for a further hour after treatment before you are discharged home.

Depending on your condition, you will require treatment for between 1 and 5 days. You may also have to return to hospital at regular intervals for further courses of treatment. How long your treatment will last for depends on your individual response to IVIg. Your neurologist will be monitoring this closely.

If you would normally drive, we advise that you arrange for someone to collect you, at least following the first few treatments.

## **Are there any side effects?**

About 10% of people will experience some side effects from IVlg; these are usually minor. Occasionally, you may experience symptoms during or soon after your treatment. These might include headache, chills, stomach pain, fever, sickness, back pain and tiredness. Do not be concerned as these symptoms usually resolve quickly. Very rarely, people have a severe allergic reaction to the treatment that can cause chest tightness, skin rash, breathing difficulties, swelling of the face or tongue and a drop in blood pressure. Medical and nursing staff will be monitoring you for any of these symptoms and will be able to treat you accordingly.

Other very rare complications of treatment can include:

- Abnormalities in liver or kidney function
- Inflammation around the brain
- Anaemia
- Increased clotting of the blood, causing deep venous thrombosis, heart attack or stroke

As immunoglobulins are blood products, they are screened to ensure they do not contain viruses such as Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV. It is possible, but very unlikely, that there are viruses and other proteins that could be passed on which we do not currently know about and therefore cannot test for. If you have any concerns after treatment you should consult your doctor for further advice.

## **How long will it take to work?**

Following your first treatment with IVIg it may take days or weeks before you notice any improvement in your symptoms. If you are going to respond to this treatment, you should notice some benefits within 4 weeks. However, some people do not respond to this treatment. If this is the case your neurologist will discuss alternative options with you.

## **Will I be able to take my other medications?**

There is no reason why you cannot continue with your regular medications whilst getting IVIg treatment. However, remember to tell your doctor of any tablets you are taking, including over-the-counter preparations.

## **Will I be able to receive vaccinations whilst taking IVIg?**

IVIg treatment may interfere with vaccinations. It is best to wait at least 6 weeks after receiving IVIg treatment before having any vaccinations.

## **Can I take them if I am pregnant?**

It is unclear if IVIg has any effect on your baby during pregnancy. We would therefore recommend avoiding IVIg treatment during pregnancy, unless this is absolutely necessary.

## **Can I still breastfeed whilst taking IVIg?**

No. IVIg can pass through the blood into breastmilk and we do not know if this safe for your baby.

## **Can I drink alcohol whilst taking IVIg?**

There is no reason not to drink alcohol sensibly during or after IVIg treatment.

## **Further Information**

If you would like further information or have any questions about IVIg, please ask to speak with nursing or medical staff on the ward.

## **References**

Drug Information Intravenous Immunoglobulin (February 2010), Arthritis Research UK

Clinical Guidelines for Immunoglobulin Use, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (May 2008), Department of Health

Dalakas M C. Update: Intravenous Immune Globulin Therapy for Neurologic Diseases. Ann Intern Med. 1997;126:721-730

## NOTES

