

Lung cancer:

Immunotherapy and side effects



Lung
Foundation
Australia

In the last few decades, immunotherapy has become an increasingly common treatment for lung cancer. Working differently to other types of cancer treatments, immunotherapy uses (fires up) the body's own immune system to fight cancer. In doing this, the treatment has potential to cause unique side effects, which require careful management.

What are the side effects of immunotherapy?

The side effects of immunotherapy treatment, often called immune-related adverse effects (IRAEs), are related to your immune system being overactive. Instead of just destroying cancer cells, your "fired up" immune system can cause inflammation anywhere in the body and start affecting healthy cells.

Side effects may develop within days of starting immunotherapy treatment, but more commonly they occur many weeks or months after starting treatment. Most people have mild side effects; however, they may be more severe if you are prescribed a combination of immunotherapy drugs or are having immunotherapy with other cancer treatments.

Some **common side effects of immunotherapy** treatment can include:



Skin rash and itching



Fatigue



Diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating



Joint aches and pains



Endocrine imbalance

More **severe side-effects of immunotherapy** treatments are related to the body's immune system causing inflammation and attacking other parts of the body. Very rarely, immunotherapy can cause serious or even life-threatening problems in the lungs, liver, hormone-making glands, kidneys, or other organs.

Some rare side effects of immunotherapy treatment may include:



Headache, change in vision



Dry eyes



Breathlessness and coughing



Yellowing of the eyes, severe abdominal pain and dark urine



Excessive thirst or urination



Muscle pain

How are immunotherapy side effects managed?

Before starting your immunotherapy treatment, it is important to discuss your medical history with your oncologist. For people living with an autoimmune disease, such as lupus, thyroiditis, Crohn's disease or rheumatoid arthritis, immunotherapy may not be a safe treatment as it may make these conditions much worse. It is important that your oncologist is aware of any autoimmune conditions you have, to make sure they are under control before starting this type of treatment.

Discussing potential immunotherapy side effects with your oncologist, prior to treatment, is also essential. You will be provided with a patient information leaflet on your prescribed immunotherapy treatment which clearly outlines the important side effects to look out for and report to your treating healthcare team.

Immunotherapy side effects can be better managed if they are reported early. If left untreated, side effects may become serious and possibly life-threatening. Early intervention is best and will help your recovery.

Treatment of side effects

Side effects are graded on a scale of 1-4 to help decide how to treat them. Moderate to severe side effects (grades 2-4) are commonly treated with a steroid medication, such as prednisone. More severe side-effects (grades 3-4) are sometimes treated in hospital with intravenous steroids or other medications. In some cases, immunotherapy may need to be stopped for a period of time until the side effects are under control.

For some people, if side effects become too severe, immunotherapy may be stopped permanently. Whilst this is disappointing, the immunotherapy you have already received may have "trained" your immune system to recognise cancer cells and destroy them, providing ongoing benefit.

Even though there is a risk of severe side effects, most people only experience mild side effects. If you do experience any side effects, report them immediately to your treating healthcare team for prompt management.

**To find out more, read our fact sheet
What is immunotherapy?**



FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Contact Lung Foundation Australia for more information, to access our support services and join our mailing list for regular updates and latest news.

Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Lung Cancer and Respiratory Support Nurses
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs
- E-newsletter

[Lungfoundation.com.au](https://lungfoundation.com.au) | Freecall 1800 654 301 | enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au

Note to reader: This information is intended as a general guide only and is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Lung Foundation Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided. Always consult with your doctor about matters that affect your health.