



Living with Pulmonary Fibrosis Immunosuppressant medications

Rituximab (MabThera, Ruxience, Riximyo, Truxima)

Disclaimer

This resource provides some information about rituximab. It does not contain all the available information and **does not take the place of talking to your doctor or pharmacist**. Always seek the guidance of your doctor or other qualified health professional for any questions you may have regarding medications, your health or medical conditions. Please refer to the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet linked below for a more detailed guide to side effects and safety precautions.

Why is this medication being recommended?

Rituximab belongs to a group of medications known as immunosuppressants. Rituximab is a 'biologic' drug, which is a manmade version of a naturally produced antibody affecting B-cells (a specific type of white blood cells). Rituximab affects your body's immune system and reduces inflammation in your lungs.

Inflammation may lead to fibrosis (scarring) in the lungs. By reducing inflammation, rituximab may prevent the formation of more lung fibrosis, and, in some cases may allow the inflamed lung to return to normal.

Rituximab is given as a drip (slow infusion) into a vein (intravenously or IV) through a cannula in your arm by a nurse in hospital. Your doctor will decide the right treatment dose and duration for you. Usually, you will receive two doses of rituximab at two weeks apart and the treatment effects last between six and nine months. The infusion normally takes two to four hours. Depending on the treatment response, your doctor may repeat infusions of rituximab. You will need to have regular blood tests, usually every two to three months.

What special precautions should I follow?

Before taking rituximab:

- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are allergic to rituximab or any other medications.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist what other prescription and non-prescription medications, vitamins, nutritional supplements, and herbal products you are taking. Your doctor may need to change the doses of your medications or monitor you carefully for side effects.
- Rituximab is not recommended to be taken by pregnant women. Consult your doctor if you are pregnant, plan to have a baby, or are breast-feeding.
- Tell your doctor if you have an active, recurring, or long-term infection.
- Your doctor may organise blood tests for hepatitis B and C, HIV, and tuberculosis to check for risks of infection.
- Vaccinations are important. Rituximab can impact the effectiveness of vaccinations. Your doctor will check if you require selected vaccinations, such as shingles, before taking rituximab.
- Tell your doctor if you have a history of heart disease such as angina, arrhythmia (abnormal heartbeat), or heart failure.

While taking rituximab:

- Avoid infection by staying away from people who have easily transmitted infections and washing or sanitising your hands often.
- You need to be treated quickly if you develop an active infection of any kind.
- Avoid pregnancy or planning a pregnancy. Use birth control during treatment if you could become pregnant. If you become pregnant, tell your doctor immediately.
- Do not breastfeed while you are taking this medication.
- You should not be immunised with 'live vaccines' during treatment. Discuss vaccination schedules with your doctor while on rituximab and always check before receiving a vaccine.
- If you are having surgery, including dental surgery, tell the doctor or dentist that you are on rituximab.
- Be careful driving and operating machinery until you know how rituximab affects you.

What side effects can this medication cause?

Rituximab severely dampens the function of your immune system, which decreases your ability to fight infection. You need to be alert to signs of infection and see your doctor immediately if you are concerned:

- Be alert for fever (particularly above 38 degrees Celsius), chills, lethargy or other signs of infection.

Rituximab may cause allergic reactions during or shortly after the infusion, especially for the first infusion.

- Potential symptoms include fever, chills and shivering, flushing, itching, tongue or face swelling, fatigue, fast heartbeat, chest pain, shortness of breath or muscle and joint pain.
- Low blood pressure may occur, which requires temporary cessation of blood pressure medications.
- You will be monitored during and after the infusion.
- On the day of rituximab infusion, you may receive additional medications, including some steroids, paracetamol, and antihistamine to relieve symptoms of allergic reaction.

Rituximab may cause other side effects. Tell your doctor if any of these symptoms are severe or do not go away:

- Diarrhoea, constipation, indigestion

- Loss of appetite, change to sense of taste, weight loss
- Muscle stiffness
- Pins and needles, or numbness in the skin
- Nervousness, feeling anxious or agitated
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Unusual hair loss or thinning is rare.

Some side effects can be serious. The following symptoms are uncommon, but if you experience any of these, contact your doctor immediately:

- Severe skin rash, itching, hives
- Swelling of the face, lips, mouth or throat that may cause difficulty in swallowing or breathing, swelling of hands, feet or ankles
- Severe difficulty breathing, wheezing or cough
- Vision loss associated with headaches, confusion and seizures
- Symptoms of serious brain infection: confusion, disorientation or memory loss; changes in the way you move, walk or talk; decreased strength or progressive weakness in your body; blurred or loss of vision
- Yellowing of skin and eyes, light-coloured bowel motions, dark-coloured urine.

What monitoring will I need?

Your GP or lung specialist may order regular blood tests between rituximab infusions to monitor for side effects and treatment response. These can include blood counts (white blood cells, red blood cells, platelets) and liver tests. There may be additional tests ordered by your doctor depending on the results and other medications you are taking. You may require blood tests to check your antibody and B-cell levels before starting or repeating treatment with rituximab.

Your specialist will also review you to discuss any other side effects you may be experiencing. They will also continue to monitor your lung function (breathing tests) over time to map out the progress of your lung condition. It's helpful to keep your own detailed record of your prescriptions and tests.

Notes on your rituximab prescription:

	Rituximab dose	Blood test (Yes/No/Date)	Side effects and other notes
Month 1			
Month 2			
Month 3			

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources and webinars
- Support groups and peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs

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