

# Side effects of immunotherapy

The immune system works to defend the body against foreign invaders for example; bacteria, viruses and abnormal cells, such as cancer cells. Cancer starts when abnormal cells begin growing out of control. The immune system usually prevents cancers from developing because it recognises abnormal or mutated cells and destroys them.

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



Diarrhoea



Joint aches and pains



Fatigue



Abdominal pain and bloating



Endocrine imbalance – occurs when there is an abnormal level of one or more hormones in the body

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 **less common side effects** of immunotherapy treatment may include:



Headache



Breathlessness and coughing



Excessive thirst or urination



Change in vision



Yellowing of the eyes



Muscle pain



Dry eyes



Severe abdominal pain and dark urine

## 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

It is very important to report any side effects to your healthcare team as soon as they occur. Prompt reporting allows your team to assess and manage symptoms early, helping to prevent complications and improve your overall treatment experience. In some cases, immunotherapy may need to be stopped for a period of time until the side effects are under control. Your healthcare team may decide to discontinue immunotherapy permanently. If this happens, it is important to recognise that the treatment you have already received may have activated your immune system to identify and target cancer cells. This immune response may continue to provide benefit even after immunotherapy has stopped.

To find out more,  
read our fact  
sheet **What is  
Immunotherapy.**



Scan to connect with a  
**Lung Cancer Specialist Nurse**  
or call 1800 654 301.

**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, always consult with your doctor about matters that affect your health.