

HER2+ Early Breast Cancer: Understanding Adjuvant Treatment



About 25% of breast cancer patients have “HER2 positive” tumors. These tumors produce too much HER2 (human epidermal growth factor receptor 2) protein, making them fast-growing and more likely to spread to other parts of the

body. HER2 positive cancer, however, may respond well to “biological” agents targeting HER2.

Patients with HER2 positive early breast cancer may receive trastuzumab (Herceptin), the only monoclonal antibody that is approved for the treatment of early breast cancer after surgery. Trastuzumab is also approved for use in HER2 positive women with advanced breast cancer.

How Trastuzumab Is Given

Several treatment plans (regimens) include the drug trastuzumab. You may receive trastuzumab in combination with chemotherapy agents (anthracyclines, taxanes, cyclophosphamide, and sometimes carboplatin), hormonal drugs (tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors), surgery, or radiotherapy.

It is recommended that patients with early stage breast cancer continue on trastuzumab for 1 year. Trastuzumab is infused through a needle into a vein, or through a central line or port placed under your skin, for about 30 to 90 minutes, either every week or once every 3 weeks. The treatment may be given in your doctor’s office or clinic.

Some Side Effects of Treatment

• Trastuzumab is usually well tolerated and side effects are rare, but you may also experience side effects from other drugs included in your treatment regimen.

For More Information

- **National Cancer Institute** (www.cancer.gov)
- **CancerNetwork.com**
- **HER2 Support Group Org** (www.her2support.org)

- There is a potential for rare but serious heart problems with trastuzumab, particularly if it is given together with an anthracycline chemotherapy drug. Your doctor will assess your heart function before, during, and sometimes even after treatment.
- Other rare side effects include serious allergic reactions to the infusion. Trastuzumab also may cause fetal harm in some pregnancies, so let your doctor know if you are pregnant.

Call Your Healthcare Provider If You Experience . . .

- New or worsening shortness of breath or cough
- Swelling of the face, ankles, or legs
- Heartbeat that feels stronger, faster, or slower than normal or has an irregular rhythm
- Weight gain of 5 pounds or more in 24 hours
- Dizziness or loss of consciousness

Benefits of Trastuzumab

- Major clinical trials including more than 10,000 women with early breast cancer show that when 1 year of trastuzumab is part of the treatment plan, breast cancer recurrence risk is reduced by 30% to 50%.
- This potential benefit from trastuzumab is in addition to the benefit from treatments such as chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, radiation, and surgery. Trastuzumab also is the only agent targeting HER2 that has shown a survival benefit when combined with chemotherapy for first-line treatment of metastatic breast cancer.
- Once you finish the chemotherapy portion of the regimen and begin to receive trastuzumab alone, your chemotherapy-related side effects (for example, hair loss) will likely disappear.
- The benefit of disease-free survival is greatest for HER2 positive women with early breast cancer who complete 1 year of therapy with trastuzumab as part of their adjuvant treatment regimen.