

Cervical Cancer: Immunotherapy



A cervical cancer diagnosis can be a lot to carry. But there are now more treatment options to choose from.

Cervical cancer has most often been treated with chemotherapy and radiation therapy. But immunotherapy is a newer way to treat it. It helps your body's natural immune system find and attack cancer cells.

What is immunotherapy for cervical cancer?

Your body's immune system attacks foreign things like germs. And your immune system can also be used to fight cancer. Immunotherapy is medicine that helps it do this. It works by helping your immune system find and attack cancer cells. There are different types of medicines used for immunotherapy. Some increase the action of the immune system. Others use proteins that stop cancer cells from hiding from the immune system.

An immune checkpoint inhibitor is the type of medicine most often used to treat cervical cancer. This medicine blocks certain proteins on cancer cells. This helps the immune system spot and destroy the cancer cells. The medicine called pembrolizumab is used to treat cervical cancer. It is given as an intravenous (IV) infusion every few weeks. It may be given along with chemotherapy and targeted therapy.

Is immunotherapy OK for everyone?

Immunotherapy may be used for any of these:

- Cervical cancer that has spread (metastatic)
- Cervical cancer that has come back
- Cervical cancer that has not responded to other treatments

To know if the medicine is right for you, your healthcare provider will look at:

- Your type of cervical cancer
- How much your cervical cancer has spread (stage)
- Your overall health

What are the risks?

Immunotherapy may have fewer side effects than chemotherapy. But it can cause side effects, such as:

- Fatigue
- Rash
- Itching
- Joint pain
- Constipation
- Diarrhea

It can also cause severe infusion reactions. Symptoms of this include:

- Chills

- Itching
- Flushing
- Shortness of breath
- Fever
- Back pain
- Serious issues in the lung, liver, kidneys, or other organs

Ask your healthcare team what side effects to watch for and when to report them. Ask what number to call when the office is closed.

Making an informed decision

If you're thinking about immunotherapy, talk with your providers. Make sure you understand all the benefits and risks. You can also:

- **Ask about clinical trials.** A clinical trial is a research study to test new treatments. You may have access to a new treatment when you join a study.
- **Get a second opinion.** You can talk with another doctor who treats cancer (oncologist). Their insights may help you feel more confident in your decision.
- **Talk with support networks.** Connect with other people who have cervical cancer. You can hear first-hand from those who have had this treatment. They can also help give you emotional support.

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