

Lupus Update with Dr. Robert Katz

Is Benlysta safe to take for a long time?

A recent study found that during the four-year use of Benlysta (the generic name is belimumab) complication rates were low. Infections associated with the drug were uncommon, and no specific infection type dominated. Some patients complained of general side effects, such as nausea and headaches. Others felt that their fatigue or joint pain might be exacerbated, but it is hard to tell if those symptoms were caused by the medication. Only one side effect in the four-year study of 345 patients was thought to be serious. Thus, it appears that Benlysta administered over a longer term has an acceptable safety profile.

Benlysta is the first drug to be approved for lupus in more than 50 years. Other lupus drugs are appearing on the horizon and may prove to be effective. Rheumatoid arthritis, a cousin illness of lupus, has many effective biological therapies available at this point. Treatment for lupus lags behind, but is picking up.

Benlysta is given once a month intravenously. The drug is proven to reduce lupus flares, but has never been tested in patients more seriously ill, such as those with lupus kidney disease. We really don't know how potent Benlysta is for certain patient groups of lupus patients. Also, African-Americans did not respond as well, so we definitely need other options for therapy.

Current lupus treatment includes Plaquenil (hydroxychloroquine), non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, prednisone, and Immunosuppressives.

Immunosuppressives reduce immune system activity, which is misdirected in systemic lupus. Some of these immunosuppressives include methotrexate, azathioprine, leflunomide, mycophenolate mofetil (Cellcept), Cyclosporine, cyclosporine, and tacrolimus. They are also used for other autoimmune diseases, chemotherapy and transplantation. So, it is good to have alternatives to immunosuppressives including the biologics like Benlysta.

A biologic medication means that the drug is made in living systems and not in chemical factories. Currently biologics are very expensive partly because they enjoy patent protection and there are no generic alternatives, and also the manufacturing process of biological drugs is complicated and expensive. Several clinical trials are ongoing, including some in Chicago.

For lupus patients who want to try new biological medications, ask the Lupus Society Mary Dollear Vice President Lupus Foundation of America, Illinois Chapter