Patient Education

Interferon Alfa (in ter feer' on)

Brand Names
Intron® A® (alfa 2b), Roferon-A (alfa 2a). There may be other brand names for this medication.

How is it Administered?
This medication is given by injection under the skin (subcutaneously) or into the muscle (intramuscularly).

Why is Interferon Alfa Given?
Interferon alfa treats some types of leukemia and lymphoma, melanoma, kidney (renal cell) cancer, cervical cancer, carcinoid syndrome, medullary thyroid cancer, multiple myeloma, and skin cancers.

How Does Interferon Alpha Work?
Our complex immune systems are designed to protect us from foreign or harmful substances that could cause disease or infection. Interferon alfa belongs to the category of therapies called biologic response modifiers (BRM) or immunotherapy. BRMs stimulate your immune system to make it more effective. Specifically, interferon is a cytokine; a protein that signals certain immune system cells to become active and attack cancer cells.

What Should I Tell My Doctor Before I Begin Receiving Interferon Alfa?
Tell your doctor if you:
- have ever had an allergic reaction to interferon
- have or have ever had heart, kidney, or liver disease; asthma; depression; mental illness; or diabetes
- are taking steroid medications, antibiotics, or vitamins
- are pregnant or breastfeeding

This drug may interact with other medications, increasing or decreasing their effectiveness or causing harmful side effects. Tell your doctor and pharmacist about any prescription or over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbal or diet supplements that you are taking.

What Are Some Possible Side Effects I May Experience?
- Fatigue
- Flu-like symptoms: fever, chills, headache sweating, muscle aches
- Decreased appetite, weight loss, nausea (usually mild if it occurs)
- Diarrhea
- Dry and/or itchy skin, rash
- Low blood counts (decreased red blood cells, white blood cells, or platelets may increase the risk of fatigue/anemia, infection, or bleeding, respectively

© 2011 Roswell Park Cancer Institute
Mood changes, depression, insomnia
Hair thinning or hair loss (usually temporary)

How Can I Manage These Side Effects?

- Spacing out your daily activities can help with fatigue. Accept assistance and delegate responsibilities when possible.
- Tylenol may help if you are having flu-like symptoms. **Always check with your doctor before starting any medications.**
- Drink at least 2-3 quarts of fluid, especially water every day, unless your doctor tells you to limit your fluids.
- Talk to your doctor or nurse about obtaining a wig before you experience hair loss.
- Do not put anything on your rash unless your doctor or nurse says you may. Keep the area clean and dry.
- To help avoid infections, stay away from crowds or people with colds, flu, or other infections. Talk to your doctor before you have any vaccinations. Wash your hands often.
- To help prevent bleeding problems, be careful when handling sharp objects. Stay away from rough sports or other situations that could result in bruising or injury. Use an electric razor. Be careful when using a toothbrush or dental floss (your doctor may recommend other ways to clean your teeth and gums).
- Ask your doctor about medication to help prevent or lessen nausea or diarrhea.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

**Call your doctor immediately if you experience:**
- any sign of infection: temperature of 100.5 F (38°C) or above, chills, sore throat, tenderness, warmth, redness or swelling at the injection site or burning or pain upon urination
- unusual bruising or bleeding: bleeding lasts more than 10-15 minutes or that causes dizziness; black or bloody stools; vomit that is bloody or that looks like coffee grounds; blood in your urine or phlegm/mucus, unusually heavy menstrual bleeding, spontaneous bleeding from your gums or nose, or superficial bleeding into the skin that appears as a rash of pinpoint-sized reddish-purple spots (petechiae)
- dizziness
- numbness or tingling in the arms, hands, legs, or feet
- thoughts of harming yourself or others

**Call your doctor as soon as possible if you experience:**
- vomiting or nausea that is not relieved by prescribed medication and/or that prevents you from eating and drinking
- diarrhea of 5-6 stools in 1 day or diarrhea with weakness
- pains, rash, or headache not relieved by prescribed medication
• persistent loss of appetite or weight loss of 5 pounds in 1 week
• extreme tiredness that interferes with normal activities
What Else Should I Know About Interferon Alfa?

- Seek help immediately if you have any signs of an allergic reaction: itching or hives, swelling in your face or hands, swelling or tingling in your mouth or throat, chest tightness, trouble breathing, or palpitations.
- Avoid taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, or steroid drugs such as prednisone.
- Your doctor will need to check your blood or urine regularly. Be sure to keep all appointments.
- This medication may cause temporary abnormalities in your blood tests such as changes in liver function tests (LFTs), low calcium, high glucose, or high triglyceride levels.
- Do not get pregnant or father a child while receiving interferon. Use of a barrier method of birth control is recommended.
- If you are getting interferon injections at home:
  - Use your medication exactly as directed. Do not change your dosing schedule without talking to your health care provider.
  - Before you receive your injection, check the solution and make sure it is clear and there is no debris floating in the vial.
  - Use a new needle and syringe each time you inject your medicine.
  - This medicine is given on a fixed schedule. If you miss a dose, call your doctor for instructions.
  - All medications and solutions must be stored in the refrigerator. Do not allow it to freeze.
  - Take your next dose from the refrigerator 1 hour before using it; place it in a clean, dry area and allow it to warm to room temperature. Do not shake the vial.
  - Do not use the medication if it has been out of the refrigerator for 24 hours or more or if refrigerated for more than 30 days.
- If you would like more information about interferon alfa, talk to your doctor.