Patient Education

Erlotinib (er-LO-tye-nib)

Brand Names

Tarceva® (There may be other brand names for this medication)

How is It Administered?

This medication is a tablet taken by mouth on an empty stomach, 1 hour before OR 2 hours after eating.

Why am I Taking Erlotinib?

This drug is used to treat advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and advanced pancreatic cancer.

How Does This Drug Work?

Erlotinib is a type of targeted therapy rather than a traditional chemotherapy drug. Traditional chemotherapy drugs identify cancer cells by their rapid rate of reproduction, and then attack those cells. Since there are many cells in our bodies that normally reproduce rapidly, these cells are also affected, resulting in unpleasant side effects.

Erlotinib is designed to work differently. Instead of attacking rapidly reproducing cells, it locates a protein (EGFR or Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor) on the surface of the cancer cells and inhibits an enzyme within those cells, which slows the growth of the cancer cells. The exact mechanism of how this takes place is not yet understood. (There are some normal cells that have EGFR on their surface and these cells may be affected.)

What Should I Tell My Doctor Before I Begin Receiving Erlotinib?

Before taking erlotinib, tell your health care provider if you:

• are allergic to erlotinib or any other drugs
• are or have been treated with chemotherapy or radiation therapy
• have or have ever had lung disease or infection, stomach ulcers, diverticular disease (abnormal pouches in the large intestine that may become inflamed), liver disease, or kidney disease
• are pregnant or breastfeeding
• use any type of tobacco products

This medication 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?

- Bone marrow depression causing low levels of white blood cells, red blood cells, and platelets, which can increase your risk for infection, fatigue, and bleeding
- Rash, itchy or dry skin, darkening of the skin, changes in appearance of hair and nails, increased sensitivity to sunlight, and/or hair loss
- Diarrhea
- Decreased appetite, nausea, vomiting, and/or stomach pain
- Fatigue
- Mouth and/or throat sores
- Cough and/or shortness of breath

How Can I Manage These Side Effects?

- To help avoid infections, stay away from crowds or people with colds or other infections. Wash your hands often. Talk to your doctor before you have any vaccinations, such as a flu shot.
- If you are fatigued, take rests during the day, and limit your activities, to a time of day when you feel a bit more energetic. Learn to ask for and accept help with household and daily chores.
- Be careful when handling sharp objects. Avoid rough sports or other situations that could cause bruising or injury. Use an electric razor.
- Do not put anything on your skin or rash unless your doctor or nurse says you may. Keep the area around the rash clean.
- Avoid unnecessary or long exposure to sunlight. Wear a hat, other protective clothing, sunglasses, and sunscreen. Choose a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher and that contains zinc oxide or titanium dioxide.
- Use a mild soap to wash your skin and remove cosmetics. Do not use any products on your skin that contain alcohol.
- To help prevent diarrhea, drink small sips of a liquid such as a sugar-free sports drink often throughout the day, eat mild foods such as crackers, and avoid spicy foods.
- If you have diarrhea or are vomiting, you are at risk for dehydration. To prevent dehydration, drink plenty of fluids, 2-3 quarts every 24 hours (unless your doctor has told you to restrict fluids).
- Ask your doctor about medication to help prevent or lessen diarrhea or nausea.
- Mouth care is very important. You should brush your teeth with a very soft toothbrush. Rinse your mouth with a mixture of ½ teaspoon of salt in 8 ounces of water or ½ teaspoon of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) in 8 ounces of water. This should be done after every meal and at bedtime, at a minimum.
- Avoid smoking, alcohol, and mouthwashes that contain alcohol.
When Should I Call the Doctor?

Call your doctor immediately if you experience:
- any sign of infection: fever of 100.5°F (38°C) or higher, chills, cough, sore throat, pain or burning upon urination; redness or tenderness along a vein, at an IV site, or at any other wound or skin irritation
- any sign 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, dizziness, or palpitations
- 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)
- any sign of dehydration: sunken eyes, dry mouth, and/or decreased urination
- eye irritation; dry, red, or painful eyes; blurred vision

Call your doctor or nurse as soon as possible if you have any of the following symptoms:
- nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, rash, or itchy skin that does not go away with prescribed medicine or that prevents you from eating or drinking
- painful mouth or throat that prevents you from eating or drinking
- extreme fatigue or weakness that interferes with daily activities

What Else Should I Know About Erlotinib?

- Take tablets on an empty stomach (1 hr before or 2 hours after a meal).
- If you take antacids, take them several hours before or after erlotinib.
- Talk to your doctor about eating grapefruit and drinking grapefruit juice.
- Men and women should use a reliable method of birth control during treatment and for 2 weeks afterwards. Erlotinib may harm the fetus.
- Tell your doctors, surgeons, and dentists you are taking erlotinib.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If several hours have passed, skip it and go back to your regular schedule and check with your doctor. Do not double dose.
- Keep erlotinib in the container, tightly closed. Store at room temperature, away from heat and moisture (not in the bathroom).
- If you would like more information about erlotinib, talk to your doctor.