

# CHOOSING WISELY – IMMUNOGLOBULIN PRODUCTS

Having a conversation about your health care with your health professional helps you make informed decisions about the care that is right for you. Ask your doctor these important questions about immunoglobulin products. We've included some information to help you understand and talk about this.

## 1 Why are immunoglobulin products prescribed?

Immunoglobulins are proteins in the blood, commonly known as antibodies. They are made by the immune system (the body's own defence system) to help fight infections and diseases.

When plasma (the fluid part of human blood) is donated, these proteins are collected and made into products containing a concentrated mix of immunoglobulins pooled from thousands of donors.

### Immunoglobulin products are used in two main ways:

#### Immunoglobulin replacement therapy (IRT)

Replacement therapy is given to people who do not make enough of their own immunoglobulins (antibodies). This can happen because of a genetic problem (primary immune deficiency) or as a result of other illnesses or treatments (secondary immune deficiency). Some people use IRT until their immune system recovers, while others need it for the rest of their lives.

IRT helps treat any existing infections associated with immune deficiency, and can stop new ones from occurring. It can help prevent long-term damage from repeated infections, such as chronic lung disease.

- ▶ IRT only replaces the missing immunoglobulin – it won't cure immune deficiency.
- ▶ IRT can help prevent long-term damage to your lungs from repeated infections, but it won't undo damage that has already occurred.
- ▶ Your doctor will need to test your immunoglobulin levels and general health before deciding if IRT can help.

#### Immunomodulation therapy (IMT)

Sometimes the immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys healthy tissue. This can result in autoimmune diseases. Immunoglobulin products can help reduce the symptoms, although how this works is not completely understood.

- ▶ IMT helps some autoimmune and inflammatory conditions but not others, and not everyone will respond to treatment. Once they have been tried, your doctor will need to assess your response to see whether immunoglobulin products are the right treatment for you.

## 2 Are there other treatments that might work?

There may be other treatments for your condition, but using these will depend on many things such as what other health concerns you have.

Antibiotics may be used to prevent and treat infections in people with primary immune deficiencies. There are several other treatments available for people with this condition including gene therapy and bone marrow transplantation.

For people with autoimmune and inflammatory conditions, there are a number of medicines that act on the immune system and help manage symptoms. For example, some conditions can be treated with corticosteroids or other medicines that suppress the immune system.

A treatment called plasma exchange (or plasmapheresis) may be used in auto-immune diseases to filter harmful substances from the blood.

You may be given immunoglobulin products short-term to treat symptoms in cases where these medicines take time to start working. Immunoglobulin products might also be tried if these treatments don't work.

Your health professional can explain your treatment options to you.

### 3 What are the side effects?

---

Immunoglobulin products can be given by needle into a vein (intravenously), or by injection into the tissue under the skin (subcutaneously). The side effects of treatment may be different depending on which method is used:

- ▶ Intravenous immunoglobulin products can cause side effects such as headache, tiredness or body pain. These are usually mild and only last a day or two. They can also occur with subcutaneous immunoglobulin products delivery but are uncommon. Very rarely, more serious side effects like allergic reactions or blood clots occur with either method.
- ▶ Subcutaneous immunoglobulin products can cause local side effects at the injection site, such as redness, swelling and soreness. This can happen with the first few infusions but gets better over time.

### Are there any safety concerns with immunoglobulin products?

Immunoglobulin products have been used for many decades and have an excellent safety record. Manufacturing of immunoglobulin products is strictly controlled to ensure safety and quality. The risk of a product containing a new virus cannot be ruled out, but is extremely low.

Talk to your doctor or other health professional about what to expect from treatment. They can tell you what can be done to help manage or reduce the chance of side effects.

### 4 Who decides which patients are treated with immunoglobulin products?

---

Strict access and management requirements make sure that government-funded immunoglobulin products are only be used for people who need them, when they need them. It takes many thousands of plasma donations to make a single batch, and the complex manufacturing processes make them safe to use but expensive to produce.

These access requirements are based on evidence from research and are known in Australia as the **Criteria for the Clinical Use of Immunoglobulin in Australia**. The **Criteria** set out the conditions and circumstances under which government-funded immunoglobulin products can be considered for use.

Your doctor will discuss how these requirements affect your treatment, including how and when your progress is reviewed. Your progress needs to be reviewed to make sure you are continuing to benefit from immunoglobulin products. For example, your dose may need to be changed. For other people, immunoglobulin products may no longer be helpful.

### 5 What does it cost?

---

If you meet the eligibility criteria immunoglobulin products will be supplied to you at no charge – costs are shared by the Australian government and the state or territory government where you live under arrangements called the National Blood Agreement.

There may be other associated costs for treatment – some hospital pharmacies may charge a service fee for dispensing subcutaneous immunoglobulin products for you to take home.

There may be other costs related to treatment, such as travel and time.

If you have been prescribed an intravenous immunoglobulin product, you will need to go to a hospital or clinic for treatment, usually once a month. This may involve travel, depending on where you live.

Treatment takes a few hours to complete, or longer if small amounts need to be given over several days. The dose given, the time between treatments, and the number of treatments given will vary from person to person.

Subcutaneous immunoglobulin products can be administered at home so you won't need to travel for treatment. However, you may have treatments more often, usually weekly or fortnightly.

Ask your doctor or health professional how often you will need treatment, how long it will take, and if you will need time to recover. You may need to take time off work or fit your treatment in around personal or family commitments.

## ! Important questions to ask your doctor about immunoglobulin products

---

▶ Why do I need immunoglobulin therapy?

▶ Are there any other treatments options available?

▶ What are the side effects?

▶ Who decides which patients are treated with immunoglobulin products?

▶ What does it cost?

---

## ? Got other questions? List them here:

---

▶

▶

▶

▶

▶

---

## ? Want to know more?

---

You can find out more about immunoglobulin here:

- ▶ National Blood Authority: Immunoglobulin: [www.blood.gov.au/Ig](http://www.blood.gov.au/Ig)
  - ▶ National Blood Authority: Patient factsheets and resources [www.blood.gov.au/patient-factsheets-and-resources](http://www.blood.gov.au/patient-factsheets-and-resources)
  - ▶ Consumer video 1: About immunoglobulins: [www.nps.org.au/ig-about](http://www.nps.org.au/ig-about)
  - ▶ Consumer video 2: Immunoglobulins and me: Catherine's story: [www.nps.org.au/ig-catherine](http://www.nps.org.au/ig-catherine)
  - ▶ Consumer video 3: Immunoglobulins and me: Cheryl's story: [www.nps.org.au/ig-cheryl](http://www.nps.org.au/ig-cheryl)
  - ▶ For more information about Choosing Wisely [www.choosingwisely.org.au](http://www.choosingwisely.org.au)
- 

### VALUE IN PRESCRIBING PROGRAM – IMMUNOGLOBULIN PRODUCTS

---

Increasing the awareness and understanding amongst health professionals of access to immunoglobulin products in Australia, and improving health outcomes for patients through access to better health information to manage their health conditions. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health through the Value in Prescribing Program: Immunoglobulins Products Grant.

