



Healtheo360 Discussion Guide: Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy is an exciting and relatively new class of treatment, primarily used to treat various forms of cancer. While receiving a diagnosis of cancer can be an incredibly stressful event, it is important that you work with your doctor(s) to develop and understand a treatment plan that will work best for you. If your doctor has raised immunotherapy as a possible treatment option for you it may be useful for your understanding to have a conversation about the process, risks, benefits, and expectations that come along with this form of therapy. This document will provide ideas for conversation points and questions to ask your doctor about immunotherapy to strengthen your understanding, so you can come to an informed decision about your treatment.

As you may be able to tell by the name of this class of therapy, immunotherapy treatments harness your immune system to fight against a disease. The immune system itself happens to be one of the more complex systems of the body; this often makes it difficult for patients to understand how their treatment will work. Starting a conversation with a basic background explanation of the relevant parts of the immune system will help you to better understand your doctor's explanation of the treatment itself. Ask your doctor to explain which parts of the immune system are involved in your form of immunotherapy, what their role is in your body, and how they function normally.

While immunotherapy is a specific class of treatment, there are many different types of immunotherapy that you may encounter when discussing options with your doctor. Each different type of immunotherapy comes with its own set of effects and rules, and therefore it can be a difficult decision to decide which type of therapy to choose. Luckily, your doctor will likely tell you which type of immunotherapy they would like you to try. This will surely leave many patients wanting more information about their specific type of treatment, information which your doctor will be happy to provide. Be sure to ask your doctor what part of the immune system your type of immunotherapy will work on, and how it will work to combat your disease. If you're interested, it can also be helpful to ask

whether your immunotherapy will be “active” or “passive,” and what these terms mean.

Similar to most other types of cancer treatment, immunotherapy can cause a variety of side effects. Since different immunotherapies are delivered in different ways, and some side effects depend on the mode of delivery you have, it is important to know whether your therapy will be delivered intravenously (IV), orally, as a topical cream, or as an intravesical treatment. Ask your doctor how your manner of delivery may or may not cause side effects, as well as what the potential side effects of your treatment are in general. Some types of treatment may have interactions with other treatments or make you more susceptible to certain illnesses; ask your doctor to warn you about any of these possibilities, and make sure to remind your doctor of all other medications you may be taking.

To wrap up your discussion, it is important for you to know how your progress will be monitored, as well as what you should expect over the course of your treatment. Ask your doctor how you will be able to tell whether your immunotherapy is working, and how long you should expect to wait before seeing results or negative effects. Be sure that you and your doctor are on the same page regarding what your next-step plan is if this type of immunotherapy doesn't work or produces unexpected negative effects.

By discussing these points with your doctor(s) you will gain a strong enough understanding of immunotherapy to make informed decisions about your treatment. If you would like to learn more about immunotherapy, you can visit the immunotherapy page at www.cancer.gov, or our immunotherapy 101 page at www.healtheo360.com.