Pegylated Interferon (Pegasys alfa-2a) for the treatment of chronic hepatitis B

Information for patients
Hepatitis Clinic
What is Pegylated Interferon?

Pegylated Interferon is a drug in injection form that is used to treat chronic (persistent) hepatitis B virus in adults. This is similar to interferon that your body’s immune system produces to fight infection.

It is used to boost your immune system. It does not remove the virus from the body but it will help to lower the amount of virus and reduce the risk of liver damage.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is very common worldwide. It is a virus that initially passes from your blood to your liver, where it infects the liver cells. The virus multiplies inside the liver cells. If your body’s immune system recognises the infected cells it will attack them. This causes your liver to become inflamed and can lead to liver scarring. This damage builds up slowly over many years, so it is important to detect it early. If left untreated the virus can cause severe scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) which can eventually lead to liver failure.

Hepatitis B infection is also associated with liver cancer, particularly in those who have cirrhosis. However, not everyone with hepatitis B gets liver damage or requires treatment. It is important to know that many people live long and healthy lives with hepatitis B.

How is the virus passed on?

The virus is present in the blood and body fluids and these are potentially infectious materials. Common ways of transmission include from mother to baby at the time of birth, by sexual contact and by blood to blood contact with needles. Transmission by social household contact can occur but is not so common; however it is recommended that all contacts including household members should be protected by vaccination.
How can I avoid passing on the infection?

People with hepatitis B should be aware of the need to avoid passing on the virus to people they live with and any sexual partner. It is important that household contacts and sexual partners are vaccinated. People with hepatitis B should:

- Ensure that all blood and body fluid spillages are cleaned up using household bleach by themselves or by someone else wearing gloves
- Not share toothbrushes, razors, nail scissors and items of jewellery
- Use condoms if having sex with someone who is not protected
- Never share needles, syringes or any other injecting equipment with anyone
- Inform the midwife if pregnant

People with hepatitis B will not be allowed to donate blood or organs.

Why have I been prescribed Pegylated Interferon?

The medical team in charge of your care have decided to offer you treatment. This decision is based on the results of your tests which have shown signs of inflammation or damage to your liver, and on guidelines from the government and international specialist groups that advise when treatment should be offered. All treatment plans are discussed and agreed with a senior doctor. However, your views and wishes will have been important in reaching the final decision.
Are there any alternative treatments?

In 2013, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) approved two antiviral drugs, Entecavir and Tenofovir that may be taken if Pegylated Interferon is not effective (for details see leaflet). Both are taken once daily by mouth. One of these drugs may be offered to you later if you do not respond to Pegylated Interferon.

Does everyone need treatment?

No. Treatment is only usually given if damage to the liver is likely. Some patients have very low levels of virus, normal blood tests and a very low risk of long term problems. In other patients, despite high levels of the virus, most doctors would not start treatment because there is little sign of inflammation and no damage to the liver. Starting treatment in these cases would risk potential side-effects without having significant clinical benefit. Another risk would be development of resistance to antiviral drugs which could make treatment difficult if required later.

How long will I have to take Pegylated Interferon for?

The length of treatment is 48 weeks but it may be stopped earlier if your virus levels have not dropped.

How do I take Pegylated Interferon?

It is important to take Pegylated Interferon exactly as your specialist has told you. This will help ensure the drug is as effective as possible. Pegylated interferon needs to be injected once a week into your ‘tummy’ (abdomen) or upper part of your leg (thigh) using a different place each time. You will be shown by a specialist nurse how to inject yourself using a technique similar to that used to treat diabetes with insulin.

To help with the flu-like symptoms of Pegylated Interferon such as muscle aches, tiredness, headaches and fever, you will be asked to
administer your injection one or two hours before going to bed, and to take paracetamol.

If you are experiencing difficulties taking your treatment or think you may encounter problems, you should discuss this with your specialist nurse as soon as possible to ensure that you get the best advice.

**What if I miss an injection?**

It is very important not to miss an injection. If you do miss a dose of Pegylated Interferon, take it as soon as you can, and then take your next injection one week later. It is important to let the specialist nurse know if this has happened so further advice can be given. Do not take two doses of Pegylated Interferon close together.

**What about my other medicines?**

Although Pegylated Interferon does not usually cause a problem with other medication, it is very important that you tell your doctor or specialist nurse about any medication you are taking (including herbal / alternative medication, inhalers, creams, injections, etc) or other medicines you have bought over-the-counter.

**Can I drink alcohol whilst taking Pegylated Interferon?**

Alcohol in excess is certainly a factor which can add to progression of liver disease in someone with a virus infection of the liver. Ideally, anybody with hepatitis B should not drink alcohol.

If you are unable to stop drinking or keep within the guidelines, your doctor or specialist nurse can arrange for you to get some additional support.
What side-effects does Pegylated Interferon have?

Like all medicines, Pegylated Interferon can cause side-effects. These can affect many people, especially in the early stages of treatment. They vary from person to person and some people are able to tolerate the medication better than others.

**Common side-effects:**

- Flu-like symptoms (chills, fever, weakness, tiredness, cough, headache, muscle / joint pain)
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Diarrhoea, nausea, abdominal pain
- Emotional and behavioural changes (e.g. depression, anxiety, aggression)
- Skin changes (itchy, dry skin, rash, loss of hair)
- Blood changes and infections

**Uncommon side-effects**

- Liver and immune system disorders
- Diabetes (high blood sugar)
- Thyroid disturbance
- Dehydration
- Peripheral neuropathy (disorder of the nerves affecting the extremities)
- Eye and ear disorders (hearing loss)
- High blood pressure

Please note that this list is not extensive; a full list of known side effects may be found in the information leaflet contained within the Pegylated Interferon packaging. It is important to tell your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you experience any possible side effects so that they may be managed appropriately (see below).
What should I do about the side-effects?

Most of the side-effects are not serious and can be managed by following advice from the specialist nurse. For example, it is important to drink water regularly and keep your fluid levels high. For some people it may be necessary to take other medication or reduce the dose of Pegylated Interferon for a couple of weeks until their blood tests improve.

Tell your doctor immediately if you notice any of the following side effects:

- Severe chest pain
- Persistent cough
- Irregular heartbeat
- Trouble breathing
- Confusion
- Depression
- Severe stomach pain
- Blood in stool (or black, tarry stools)
- Severe nosebleed
- Problems with your eyesight.

These side effects can be serious and you may need urgent medical attention.

Is monitoring treatment necessary?

Yes. You will usually attend clinic weekly for the first four weeks and then monthly for monitoring tests to:

- Check you are tolerating the drug
- Check the drug is reducing the level of virus
- Check for side-effects
Can I still infect other people?

If the virus is still present in your blood there is a risk of passing it on to other people who are not immune to the infection.

Who should I contact if I have any concerns?

You can speak with one of the specialist nurses working in the clinic.

- 0114 271 1531
  Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm

If they are not available, please leave a message (giving your name and telephone number) and they will call you back.

Outside of these hours you can call your GP or the NHS helpline 111.

This information is not intended to replace any patient information produced by the manufacturers of Pegasys.