

Biologics for IBD

This information sheet is for people who want to learn about biologic medications.

Key points

- Biologic medications target the immune system to decrease inflammation.
- Biologics can help with symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), but they may cause side effects in some people.
- Most people start feeling better within a few weeks or months of starting a biologic.

What is a biologic medicine and how does it work?

Biologic medicines are antibodies (immunoglobulins) that are created in a laboratory through biological rather than chemical processes. Antibodies are produced naturally by white blood cells of the immune system to target and destroy specific bacteria or viruses. The antibodies that we call biologics target the proteins in the inflammatory pathways rather than the bacteria or viruses that cause an infection. They are manufactured in living cells which create specific antibodies that pinpoint and remove specific inflammatory proteins. This switches off the inflammatory pathway and allows the inflammation to settle down.

Biologic medicines are effective in improving symptoms, helping people feel better, reducing the need for hospital visits or surgery, and inducing or maintain remission. There are many different biologics, and they target different inflammatory pathways:

Anti-tumour necrosis factor agents (anti-TNF): these biologics (e.g. adalimumab, infliximab, golimumab) block a protein called tumour necrosis factor alpha (TNF-alpha). TNF-alpha helps you fight infections but can also promote inflammation in the intestines and other organs. Anti-TNF medications can reduce symptoms of IBD and help heal the intestines.

Interleukin-12 and -23 antagonists: these biologics (e.g. ustekinumab) stick to a molecule called interleukin (IL)-12 and IL-23. Your immune system naturally makes IL-12 and IL-23 to help fight infections. However, overactive IL-12 and IL-23 can cause ongoing inflammation.

Integrin receptor antagonists: these biologics (e.g. vedolizumab) target proteins in the blood vessels in the bowel wall called integrins. By blocking integrins, these medicines stop inflammatory white blood cells migrating into the bowel wall. This reduces bowel inflammation and improves symptoms.

How do I take biologic medications?

You can't take biologics by mouth because the gut breaks them down before they can work effectively. The way you take the medication depends on which one you are on. There are two ways to take biologics, depending on the medication:

Intravenously (IV): the medicine is given directly into the vein through a drip in your arm. A nurse or doctor will do this in a hospital or clinic.

Subcutaneously: the medicine is injected under your skin. You can do it yourself at home with a prefilled pen or syringe device. Your IBD team will help you and ensure you have everything you need, like a sharps container to dispose of the used device.

How fast do biologics work and how long will I take them?

It can take a few weeks or even months to see improvement in symptoms after starting a biologic medicine, but some people feel better sooner. If you don't see any improvement after a few months, your IBD team may suggest stopping that medication and trying a different one. How long you stay on a biologic medicine depends on how you feel, medical test results, and discussions with your IBD team. If the medicine works well for you, you might take it for a long time.

Are biologics safe and what are the possible side effects?

Before you start a biologic medicine, your IBD team will check if it's right for you by doing blood tests, making sure your vaccinations are up to date, and other scans. Most people don't get side effects or if they do, they find that the benefits of biologics are greater than the possible side effects. Some side effects can include headaches, a higher risk of infections (seek medical advice urgently for fever or chills) and skin reactions. Anti-TNF medications are associated with a very slight increase in the risk of lymphoma. Always notify your IBD team if you have any of these side effects.

More information on how to access biologics, their cost, and taking biologics during pregnancy and breastfeeding is available through the QR code.

For help or information

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