HYDROXYCARBAMIDE
(FORMERLY KNOWN AS HYDROXYUREA)

What are the aims of this leaflet?
This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about hydroxycarbamide. It tells you what it is, how it works, how it is used to treat skin conditions, and where you can find out more about it.

What is hydroxycarbamide and how does it work?
Hydroxycarbamide, formerly known as hydroxyurea, affects cells that are dividing rapidly, such as the skin cells in psoriasis and the blood cells in the bone marrow. It is mainly used for cervical and blood cancers, but is also used to treat psoriasis. It is known as a ‘cytotoxic’ medicine, meaning that it interferes with cell growth.

How long has hydroxycarbamide been available?
Hydroxycarbamide has been available to treat psoriasis since 1965.

Which skin conditions are treated with hydroxycarbamide?
Hydroxycarbamide is used for severe plaque psoriasis that is not responding to other treatments.

How long will I need to take hydroxycarbamide before it has an effect?
Most patients notice an improvement, which starts after a few weeks and reaches a maximum after 6-8 weeks.
What dose of hydroxycarbamide should I take?

Your doctor will advise you. It is available in 500 mg capsules and you may be asked to take 1 to 3 capsules daily.

How long will I need to take hydroxycarbamide?

If it is found to be effective, hydroxycarbamide can be taken for months or years. The treatment must be monitored carefully by your GP or consultant.

What are the possible side effects of hydroxycarbamide?

Due to hydroxycarbamide affecting cell growth, it can affect the way that blood cells are made in the bone marrow. Hydroxycarbamide can therefore occasionally cause side effects:

- Hair loss
- Skin pigmentation (mild/yellow grey)
- Liver inflammation (rare)
- Kidney dysfunction (rare, and less likely if you drink plenty of water)
- Drug reaction (drug-related lupus) - light sensitivity, muscle and joint pains
- Leg ulcer
- Gout

Stop the hydroxycarbamide and contact your doctor immediately if you develop any of the following:

- An infection
- A severe sore throat, fever and mouth ulcers
- Unexplained bruising or bleeding

How will I be monitored for the side effects of hydroxycarbamide treatment?

Regular blood checks are required as long as you are taking hydroxycarbamide. It is important that you attend these. Usually you need weekly visits until the dose is stabilised, and then every 1-3 months afterwards. All patients taking hydroxycarbamide develop temporary macrocytosis (large red blood cells) which is identified on blood tests but not harmful in any way.
A low white blood cell count increases the risk of infection - you must report any illness to your doctor. If you are in contact with chickenpox or shingles contact your doctor immediately

A low red blood cell count (anaemia) causes tiredness and breathlessness

A low platelet count increases the risk of bleeding and bruising.

There may be a small increase in the risk of skin cancer, so you should protect your skin from the sun during your treatment.

The BAD Biologic Interventions Register (BADBIR)

If you have been prescribed hydroxycarbamide for treatment of your psoriasis, you may be asked to take part in the national biologics register. This register is to compare the safety of different treatments for psoriasis and to see how well they work. It was set up to monitor some new treatments for psoriasis called biological treatments. The register will give doctors information on how best to use the treatments available for moderate to severe psoriasis. No information will be passed to the register without your informed consent.

Does hydroxycarbamide affect fertility or pregnancy?

You must not become pregnant whilst on hydroxycarbamide, and for at least 2 months after stopping treatment. If you are thinking about starting a family talk to your healthcare provider for alternative treatments. Do not handle the capsules if you are pregnant or breast feeding, or if you are a man hoping to father a child. Do not breast feed if you are taking hydroxycarbamide.

Can I take other medicines at the same time as hydroxycarbamide?

Always ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking any new medicine.

- Combining hydroxycarbamide with some medications such as methotrexate or cytarabine can result in suppression of the bone marrow and therefore requires close supervision.
- You should avoid immunisation injections with any of the live vaccines such as polio and rubella (German measles). Inform your doctor or nurse that you are taking hydroxycarbamide prior to any vaccinations. Flu vaccines and Pneumovax are safe and recommended. See Patient Information Leaflet on Immunisation.
Where can I find out more about hydroxycarbamide?

If you want to know more about hydroxycarbamide, or if you are worried about your treatment, you should speak to your doctor or pharmacist. This information sheet does not list all of the side effects of hydroxycarbamide. For fuller details, look at the drug information sheet which comes as an insert with your prescription for hydroxycarbamide.

For details of source materials use please contact the Clinical Standards Unit (clinicalstandards@bad.org.uk).

This leaflet aims to provide accurate information about the subject and is a consensus of the views held by representatives of the British Association of Dermatologists: its contents, however, may occasionally differ from the advice given to you by your doctor.

This leaflet has been assessed for readability by the British Association of Dermatologists’ Patient Information Lay Review Panel

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