

Erythropoietin and EPO Medication

Other names for this are:

- Aranesp - darbepoetin alfa
- Eprex[®] - epoetin alfa

What is erythropoietin?

Erythropoietin is a hormone that helps your body make red blood cells. Red blood cells carry oxygen to all parts of your body. Each cell in your body needs oxygen to live.

The kidney makes erythropoietin. When you have renal failure you have less red blood cells because the kidney cannot make erythropoietin. When you do not have enough red blood cells, your body does not get enough oxygen. This causes a problem called anemia. When you have anemia you may feel cold, tired, short of breath, lack energy and be able to do less activity.

A hemoglobin blood test is done to measure the amount of red blood cells and check for anemia.

What is erythropoiesis stimulating medication?

Erythropoiesis stimulating medication is also called EPO medication.

EPO medication helps treat anemia by helping your body make more red blood cells. This should improve your energy level and make you feel better. EPO medication does not help your kidney problem.

EPO medication helps decrease the need for blood transfusions. Sometimes, your doctor may feel you also need a transfusion to help.

How do I take EPO medication?

EPO medication is safe to take with other medications and can be used with any type of dialysis. EPO medication may also be used for people who have anemia but have not started on dialysis.

Your nephrologist decides how much medication by looking at your blood tests. The amount you need may change and your doctor will tell you what to do.

When you first start EPO medication, your nurse will give it through an intravenous during hemodialysis. If you are in the clinic, the nurse will give this medication by a small needle under your skin.

If you do dialysis at home, you will learn to give the injection to yourself or have a helper learn to do it. You can pick up your prescription at St. Joseph's Pharmacy.

How soon after starting EPO medication will I feel better?

It will take time for EPO medication to work in your body. Most people take 1 to 2 months to feel better.

How long will I take EPO medication?

This will depend on your body and the type of kidney disease you have. The amount of EPO medication prescribed for you is based on the results of your hemoglobin blood tests.

You may have times when you do not have to take EPO medication. You may have times when you have to start treatment again.

Are there any side effects?

EPO medication is very safe. In rare cases, patients feel like they have the flu about 1 hour after an injection. This is not serious and the feeling does go away.

EPO medication improves hemoglobin so your blood pressure may go up. People taking blood pressure medication may need to increase the amount of blood pressure medication they take. Your doctor and nurses will take your blood pressure and your doctor will tell you if you need to change your medication. You can help control your blood pressure by limiting the amount of salt and water you have and taking all of your medications as directed by your doctor.

EPO medication does not cause seizures. High blood pressure may cause seizures so it is important to control your blood pressure. If you had seizures and are taking medication to prevent seizures, EPO medication is safe to take.

EPO medication does not affect your potassium level. However, when you begin to feel better, you may feel hungry and eat more foods that contain potassium. This raises the amount of potassium in your blood. You need to be aware of this and may want to talk to your dietitian about your dietary needs.

EPO medication does not cause fistulas or grafts to clot.

Do I have to take iron when I am taking EPO medication?

EPO needs iron to work best. Therefore, most people need to take iron supplements by mouth or intravenous.

Iron may cause constipation. If you need help with constipation, ask your dietitian to help you adjust your diet safely.

How do I take EPO medication when I travel?

Ask a member of your health care team to arrange for the Pharmacy Department to give you enough EPO medication for your trip. You will need to carry the medication in a cooler container and have a cool place to store it. **Do not store EPO medication where it may freeze.**

What about the cost of EPO medication?

- EPO medication is covered by the Ontario Government through a special drug program.
- Because of this special program, you can only get EPO medication at the St. Joseph's Hospital Pharmacy Department.

How do I store EPO medication?

Store EPO medication in the refrigerator and away from direct light. Be sure to check the expiry date before you use this medication. **Do not freeze or shake the medication.**

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns?

Contact your nephrologist, pharmacist or talk to your nurse if you have any questions or concerns.

