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Early Research Suggests That Ipilimumab and Nivolumab Work Better Together for Advanced Melanoma

Results from an early, ongoing study suggest that pairing the drug ipilimumab (Yervoy) with a new drug called nivolumab works better to shrink advanced melanoma. Currently, ipilimumab is a standard treatment option for advanced melanoma in many countries. Nivolumab, when used by itself, has been shown to effectively treat melanoma, as well as other cancers, in previous studies. Both nivolumab and ipilimumab are types of immunotherapy, a treatment designed to boost the body's natural defenses to fight the cancer. It uses materials either made by the body or in a laboratory to improve, target, or restore immune system function. Specifically, nivolumab targets PD-1 and ipilimumab targets CTLA-4, which are both found on the surface of tumor cells and keep the immune system from destroying the cancer. These drugs stop PD-1 and CTLA-4 from working so the immune system can get rid of the cancer.

This study included patients with stage III and stage IV (cancer that has spread) melanoma that could not be removed with surgery. Before participating in this study, all of the patients had already received up to three different treatments that had stopped working. The results discussed here are from 37 patients who all received the same dose of ipilimumab, but three different doses of nivolumab, although there were more patients participating in the study.

Researchers found that 21% of the patients (3 out of 14 patients) who received the lowest dose of nivolumab and 50% of patients (3 out of 6 patients) who received the highest dose of nivolumab had their tumor shrink. In addition, these drugs started to shrink the tumors quickly, with three out of four patients having their tumors shrink within three months of starting treatment. Overall, one-third of the patients had their tumor shrink by more than 80%.

What this means for patients

"Melanoma researchers have been hopeful that combining treatments would increase the effectiveness of immunotherapies, and now we have confirmation that such an approach could work," said Jedd D. Wolchok, MD, PhD, a medical oncologist at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Ipilimumab is currently used to treat melanoma. However, nivolumab is still being studied and this drug combination is only available through clinical trials. If you are interested in participating in a clinical trial, talk with your doctor for more information.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What stage of melanoma do I have? What does this mean?
- What are my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me?

For More Information