

Antiretrovirals



Less guesswork

Qualifying tests you'll need to take before starting certain drugs

by Zoran Stjepanovic

Qualifying tests are taking a bit of the guesswork out of whether two antiretroviral drugs, maraviroc (Celsentri) and abacavir (Ziagen), can work you.

Tropism testing for maraviroc

In the last issue of *living* magazine, we talked about a new entry inhibitor, maraviroc, and how results from clinical trials showed its effectiveness. There's one catch, though: before you're even considered for this drug, you have to take a specialized test, called a tropism test, to see if maraviroc is an option for you.

Monograph Biosciences has developed a blood test called Trofile, which is used to determine if you have a CCR5-type virus or CCR4-type virus. As we've mentioned in past issues of this magazine, when HIV attaches itself to a CD4 receptor, it needs a co-receptor for the virus to enter the CD4 cell and start reproducing. This co-receptor can be a CCR5 or a CXCR4. If you're HIV-positive, you can have either co-receptor; however, maraviroc will only work for those with the CCR5 receptor.

If you live in BC and take the test, your blood work has to be sent to California, since Monograph Biosciences doesn't yet perform the test in Canada. You'll get your results within a month. This raises some concerns about the security of your personal information, since the US still bans HIV-positive people from entering the country.

Under the Expanded Access Program, the drug manufacturer will cover the costs of having this test done. However, once maraviroc is fully available in BC, it will raise the question of whether tropism testing will be covered through the BC Medical Services Plan.

Hypersensitivity testing for abacavir

Abacavir is a nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NRTI). The abacavir hypersensitivity screening test helps identify those persons with HIV who may be at a high risk for a serious adverse reaction to abacavir or drugs containing abacavir—namely Kivexa (abacavir/lamivudine) and Trizivir (abacavir/zidovudine/lamivudine).

Up to eight percent of people with HIV might develop quite a severe reaction to abacavir. This reaction can include fever, rash, gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach pain), respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, sore throat) and other symptoms such as unexpected lack of energy, and muscle and bone pain. Usually, this type of severe reaction occurs within the first six weeks of starting abacavir and you need to see your doctor right away. You'll have to stop taking abacavir, and can never take it again because you could have a fatal reaction if you do.

Fortunately, now there's a test to see if you're likely to have a reaction to abacavir. A blood test checks for the presence of specific genetic material called HLA-B*5701. If the test result reveals that you have this genetic material, you have a high risk of developing a hypersensitivity reaction and you shouldn't use abacavir or any drug containing it. If the test shows up negative, this means there is a less than one percent chance that you'll develop the hypersensitivity reaction—although it can still occur, so you need to monitor how you're feeling. The hypersensitivity test is available in Canada.



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