

Latest treatment for lung cancer - immunotherapy



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By Dr Ooi Wei Seong

For a long time, lung cancer has been the top cause of cancer deaths despite being less common than other types of cancer such as breast cancer and colon cancer.

The reason for the higher mortality rate is due to the fact that lung cancer patients are often diagnosed only in the advanced stages, when treatment options are limited.

While chemotherapy and targeted therapy remain the standard of care for cancer patients, a different type of treatment is drawing more and more attention in the field of lung cancer treatment.

Immunotherapy, or biologic therapy, has become the new buzzword for oncologists and medical practitioners in the field of cancer care. Instead of killing cancer cells directly like chemotherapy does, immunotherapy works by boosting the immune system so that the patient's body can reject and destroy the cancer by itself.

At the European Cancer Congress held in Vienna in September 2015, delegates were quick to fill rooms where talks about immunotherapy results were being presented.

Patients whose cancer cells no longer respond to the original line of treatment given are usually moved on to different types of chemotherapy. Immunotherapy now offers another option when this change in treatment is needed. Furthermore, it has been shown to do better than standard chemotherapy drugs in extending survival in phase three trials.

Results of the trials involving immunotherapy drug Nivolumab were recently published, and the drug has been FDA-approved for the treatment of non-small-cell lung cancer, which is the most common type found in lung cancer patients. Another drug called Pembrolizumab has also been approved for treatment in the same group of patients.

While these developments in immunotherapy are important, chemotherapy remains an important type of treatment for advanced cancers.

Not every patient will respond to immunotherapy, which has a 40 per cent response rate, and patients who don't respond to immunotherapy will still need to go through chemotherapy to treat their illness.

Nonetheless, there are many other immunotherapy agents in the pipeline. One such drug is Atezolizumab, which has been shown to extend survival beyond that offered by standard chemotherapy today. Trials with this agent are still ongoing.

While immunotherapy has shown great results in some patients, the most suitable patients for this type of treatment have yet to be identified. Doctors have reported cases in which the cancer had shrunk away almost completely and was under control for a longer time than with chemotherapy.

However, as miraculous as it sounds, immunotherapy drugs do come with some side effects and may cause inflammation of the bowels or lungs or other parts of the body in rare cases.

According to the National Cancer Centre Singapore, an average of 1,370 people were diagnosed with lung cancer every year from 2010 to 2014.

Smoking remains the biggest cause of lung cancer, but exposure to second-hand smoking and other environmental pollution may also increase risk.

Some symptoms include prolonged cough, shortness of breath, coughing of blood and unintentional weight loss. Those who are experiencing any of these symptoms should seek medical advice.

[Dr Ooi Wei Seong is the Consultant Medical Oncologist at The Harley Street Heart & Cancer Centre.](#)

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