Side Effects of IG

When patients experience side effects from IG therapy, they often can control them by altering treatment methods or by switching to a different IG product or treatment.

By Kris McFalls and Nancy Creadon, RN

DO THE SIDE effects of medication outweigh the risks of not taking a medication? While the answer to that question will differ depending upon the type of medication, in the case of intravenous immune globulin (IVIG), the answer is, most often, no. Most side effects of IVIG are considered mild, manageable and would not require the discontinuation of therapy, according to the website, www.immunedisease.com. And, patients like Nancy Hoffman know this: The flu-like symptoms, such as fatigue, backaches and headaches that follow an infusion of IG, pale in comparison to the constant bombardment of potentially life-threatening infections she had before the diagnoses of common variable immune deficiency (CVID) and idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP). The same could be said for Julienne Dallara, who has chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (CIDP). For her, the benefits of being able to do simple things, such as take a bath without help, work outside the home, take care of her kids or walk instead of riding in a wheelchair, far outweigh the side effects of the IVIG infusions.

Most side effects of IVIG are considered mild, manageable and would not require the discontinuation of therapy.

For example, according to the CIDP USA Foundation (www.cidpusa.org), females with a history of migraines are more likely to experience headaches with IVIG.

Amy Ehlers, a specialty pharmacist for NuFACTOR, a division of FFF Enterprises, Temecula, Calif., says: “Before starting any medication, patients should discuss with their physician all of the risks and benefits. For most patients, the benefits outweigh the risks, but that isn’t always the case. In addition, some side effects are more serious than others and may require more comprehensive patient education or ongoing monitoring.” The plain and simple fact about IG is that most patients utilizing the treatment depend on it for survival. So the question is not whether to use IG treatment because of the side effects, but rather, how to deal with the side effects that come with it.

First and most important

First and most important, all side effects should be discussed with the prescribing physician. For serious side effects, which are rare, such as chest pain, difficulties breathing, severe headaches and changes in blood pressure, patients should immediately call 911. Other side effects, such as nausea, mild to moderate headaches, fever, chills, muscle pain, minor rashes and backache, can usually be lessened with some modifications directed by the patient’s doctor. Fortunately, most patients experiencing these side effects can be helped by slowing down the rate of infusion. Premedication with acetaminophen, antihistamines or, occasionally, steroids can also help decrease side effects.1

Hydration the day before, the day of and the day after IG treatment, says Ehlers, also seems to have a direct relationship to the number and severity of reactions: “IG is a viscous fluid rich in antibodies. When infused into a patient, the human body reacts by immediately drawing fluid from other body parts to help tissues absorb the new proteins. If the patient is not well-hydrated, common symptoms of dehydration such as headaches, dry skin/mouth,
fatigue, muscle cramping and dizziness may occur.” Therefore, whether utilizing IVIG or subcutaneous immune globulin (SCIG), it is important to hydrate.

Finding an IG Product or Treatment with Fewer Side Effects
All IG products are made from human plasma, and all manufacturers follow strict protocols for safety. However, not all IG products are made the same. Therefore, if a patient battles side effects, no matter what is done to reduce them, it may be time to try another brand or another method. The patient’s pharmacist and doctor will be able to help find a product that works best for them.

For Nancy, the side effects of IVIG never went away. In addition, Nancy’s problems with venous access required nine to 10 attempts to insert the needle just to get an infusion started. For her, the answer was to switch her method of infusion from intravenous to subcutaneous. With SCIG, the immune globulin is infused in smaller, more frequent doses to allow the body to absorb the fluid more slowly, thus resulting in fewer, if any, side effects. And, because the IVIG treatments stopped the progression of her disease, Julienne’s income is up 25 percent, and she no longer has the need for disability.

Dealing with a Lack of IgA
Some patients who have little or no IgA antibodies have experienced anaphylactic or anaphylactoid reactions when given IVIG products that contain moderate amounts of IgA. As a result, when infused with a product containing IgA, the patient’s body may launch a response to what it perceives as a foreign invader. Some case studies, however, suggest that certain patients may be able to safely infuse subcutaneously, and later transition back to IVIG if desired. One study in particular found that “immunoglobulin can be given to IgA-deficient patients without side effects when infused subcutaneously... [which] suggests that this route of administration should be recommended for infection-prone IgA-deficient patients.” The study’s authors noted, however, that it is “important to stress the need for a careful surveillance and monitoring of these patients when new therapeutic strategies are employed.”

Conclusion
While side effects from IVIG therapy are likely to occur, they can often be mitigated. More importantly, the risks of not using IG are much greater than any side effects that may ensue. The best news is that side effects can be controlled and it’s simply a matter of making changes to deal with them by keeping well-hydrated, by taking additional medications to lessen the effects, or by altering the type of IG products and/or treatment.

References

KRIS MCFALLS is IG Living’s full-time patient advocate, and Nancy Creadon, RN, is vice president of clinical service for NuFACTOR, the specialty pharmacy of FFF Enterprises, which specializes in biopharmaceutical management and distribution.