



INFORMATION on Tacrolimus and Pimecrolimus

To patients who may have used or are considering using topical Elidel (pimecrolimus) or Protopic (tacrolimus):

What are these medicines?

Elidel and Protopic are creams and ointments that treat various skin disorders. They are marketed and approved by the FDA for treating atopic dermatitis, a chronic skin condition considered a form of eczema. These products have also been used for skin conditions not currently approved by the FDA called "off-label use." The active ingredients slow down a chemical called calcineurin in certain cells which reduces the activity of cells in the skin that cause inflammation (irritation).

What problems do Elidel and Protopic have?

The most common side effect is that they can cause a burning feeling when first applied to the skin. This tends to improve over time.

What other concerns have been raised?

The FDA has placed a black box warning on Elidel and Protopic. The Dermatology community and the manufacturers of Elidel and Protopic disagree with the FDA's labeling of these medications and the issues are far from settled.

With this information sheet we are trying to help you to make an informed decision about whether to use these medications.

What are the FDA's concerns?

The FDA published its concerns in a Public Health Advisory on March 10, 2005. After high oral doses (in contrast to creams applied to skin) some lab animals developed cancer including lymphoma (cancer of the blood cells). The FDA has not ordered calcineurin inhibitors off the market or limited their use despite the concerns.

Based on early information and its perception of how the medication works, the FDA recommends:

That the medications be used only if patients cannot use other available treatments

That the medications not be used for children younger than age two

That the medications be used for short periods of time and not continuously

That the medications not be used in patients with weak immune systems

That the medications be used only in the minimum amounts needed to control symptoms

The FDA acknowledged that increased risk of cancers in lab animals occurred following exposure to these drugs at doses higher than normally used by patients. FDA has received reports of cancers in patients using these drugs, but there is no scientific evidence that the drugs caused the cancers.

These results may or may not apply to humans. We know that calcineurin inhibitors given orally in doses high enough to reduce the immune system can increase the risk of cancer just like other drugs that impair the immune system that protect us from cancer. Yet the cancers reported in patients using Elidel and Protopic are not the types seen when the immune system is reduced. In patients using Elidel and Protopic the number of cancers reported is less than expected, although not every cancer gets reported.

American Academy of Dermatology's statement

The American Academy of Dermatology represents dermatologists across the country. Past president, Clay Cockerell, MD, issued a letter saying that no scientific evidence links these medicines and cancer. Of the millions of prescriptions throughout the world he notes there have been only ten documented cases of lymphoma in patients receiving these drugs. He also noted that the types of lymphoma reported are not the type previously associated with immunosuppressive drugs used in transplant patients. On behalf of the American Academy of Dermatology, Dr. Cockerell urged the FDA not to issue alarming warnings about the drugs. He said the drugs were valuable medications in the treatment of atopic dermatitis and related skin diseases and observed that they have assisted millions of patients already. "It is our strong position that they are safe if used properly," he wrote.

What are other choices?

Every medication available for treatment of eczema has risks both known and unknown. Topical corticosteroids (cortisone) creams are often used for atopic dermatitis and eczema. Side effects with long-term use include possible thinning of the skin or getting stretch marks. Cortisone creams should not be used on the face or in the folds of the skin unless your doctor approves it. They can cause glaucoma if repeatedly used in or near the eyes. Cortisones are easily absorbed into the bloodstream and can adversely affect adrenal gland function, in rare cases lead to serious complications. Children who use a lot of cortisone or very strong cortisones can have reduction in their growth.

Other treatments for atopic dermatitis include oral antibiotics and ultraviolet light (medically-supervised tanning). Your doctor can describe these and other possible treatments for your specific circumstances.

Recommendations

The FDA's concerns about Elidel and Protopic are based on animal studies and no more than twenty cases among 7 million prescriptions. The American Academy of Dermatology states there is no evidence that Elidel and Protopic are likely to be harmful if used properly. In Dr Hoyer's experience, she has found no reason to depart from the American Academy of Dermatology's recommendations.

It is important for you to be informed, weigh the risks of each treatment and the consequences of no treatment also. Above all, you need to be confident and comfortable with the choice you make.