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COMPREHENSIVE CARE FOR WOMEN WITH GYNECOLOGIC CANCER

Altretamine

What names may be used for this medication?

Altretamine, Hexalen, Hexamethylmelamine

How and why is this medicine given?

Altretamine is given in a pill form. We use it most commonly in our office for the treatment of recurrent ovarian cancer. It is typically used by itself (single agent therapy).

How does the medicine work?

Altretamine function is not well understood, but it is believed to form crosslinks between pieces of your body's DNA (the machinery or "brain" that runs each cell) causing damage that prevents the DNA from replicating, which prevents the cell itself from reproducing. Altretamine is not able to discriminate between good cells and cancer cells, so it can affect many parts of your body besides the cancer. Since non-cancer cells are better than the cancer cells at detecting and repairing the damage caused by altretamine, the cancer cells die and your normal cells repair the damage so they can resume their normal function. The side effects you experience from altretamine are a result of this damage to your healthy cells before they have a chance to repair themselves.

Altretamine is cleared from your body by both the liver and the kidneys. The liver first activates the drug and later breaks down the drug while the kidney filters out these by-products. It is therefore important that you keep yourself well hydrated (8-10 glasses of water per day) in efforts to keep the kidneys working at their best. We will monitor your liver and kidney function through blood tests performed prior to each treatment cycle. We will also review your list of medications that you take for other medical problems (diabetes, blood pressure, etc.) at each visit to be sure that none of these other medicines are interfering with clearing the altretamine from your body.

How often is this medicine given?

Altretamine is given on a daily basis for 2 weeks out of the month (that is, you take the medicine for 14 days followed by a medicine free break of 14 days). The daily doses are given in 4 divided doses (after each meal and at bedtime). The total number of treatment cycles recommended will be outlined for you by your doctor prior to beginning therapy. Altretamine is of course taken at home after a prescription is filled. Prior to each treatment, you will be seen in the office for an exam, and blood tests will be reviewed to be sure it is safe to administer your treatment. It is, of course, very important to keep all of your appointments for chemotherapy and lab testing.

What side effects does this medicine cause?

There are many possible side effects of all chemotherapy drugs, so the following is only inclusive of the most common or serious possibilities from altretamine. You will be asked to complete a symptom form at each visit in order for us to accurately assess the side effects that you may be experiencing. This form helps your doctor be sure that no adverse effects of treatment are overlooked, and it serves to help you recall which symptoms you may have experienced since your last treatment.

- ❖ Nausea and vomiting are moderate but less common today than in the past because of much improved anti-nausea medications.
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You will be given prescriptions for medications for nausea, and it is important that you take them as directed in order for them to be most effective. If you have questions, do not hesitate to call the office.

- ❖ Nerve toxicity is seen patients taking altretamine. Numbness, tingling, burning, or pain in your hands or feet may be signs of nerve injury. Please report these symptoms if present at your next office visit. These symptoms typically resolve after stopping treatment. Vitamin B6 (pyroxidine) is used to prevent neurotoxicity of other medications but should NOT be used with altretamine as it may interfere with the efficacy of treatment.
 - ❖ Hair loss may be seen with altretamine, but hair growth should return upon completion of treatment.
 - ❖ Bone marrow suppression is when the bone marrow cannot make enough red cells, white cells, or platelets to keep up with demand, and this is a side effect of most chemotherapy medications, including altretamine. All of your blood counts will be monitored regularly throughout treatment.
 - ◆ *Anemia* is the result of not enough red blood cells and may cause fatigue, chest pain, shortness of breath, or dizziness.
 - ◆ *Neutropenia* results when your white blood cell count goes too low, and this will put you at an increased risk for infection. It is very important that you avoid sick friends and family; be diligent about hand-washing as well. This does not mean that you cannot be out in public, and in fact you can continue to participate in normal activities such as going to church or a movie, etc. If you think you may have an infection or have a fever of 100.5°F or more, call the office immediately.
 - ◆ *Thrombocytopenia* is the term for too low of a platelet count. This can lead to excessive bruising or bleeding with only minor injury such as brushing your teeth or blowing your nose.
 - ❖ *Mucositis* is sores/ulcers in the mouth that can cause pain and difficulty eating or swallowing. This is not common but may occur with altretamine. This can be minimized with good oral hygiene and a warm salt-water solution gargled after each meal. Prescription medication is also available if these steps are ineffective at resolving your symptoms.
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- ❖ Mild diarrhea or constipation are sometimes seen with altretamine. For your comfort, keep your bowels regular with a regimen that works best for you and your lifestyle. If you develop diarrhea that is not controlled with over the counter medications after 2 days or you develop constipation to the point that you do not move your bowels for 3 days, contact our office.
 - ❖ Flu-like symptoms with headache, low grade fevers, fatigue, and myalgias/arthralgias (pain in muscles and/or joints) may be experienced by those receiving altretamine. Over the counter agents such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen typically provide adequate relief, but prescription pain medicine can be given if needed.
 - ❖ There is a risk of developing leukemia following altretamine treatment. This is very rare and typically develops 5-8 years after therapy.
 - ❖ Altretamine can cause problems with fertility. It is not uncommon to stop having periods while receiving altretamine, but these typically return to normal after stopping treatment. Your doctor will discuss this in more detail if applicable to you.
 - ❖ If you are pregnant or become pregnant during therapy, you should notify your doctor immediately.

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