Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy For Bladder Cancer

Immunotherapy is an advanced treatment option for bladder cancer that harnesses the power of your immune system to fight cancer cells. At Birmingham Urology Centre, we offer cutting-edge immunotherapy treatments as part of our comprehensive approach to managing bladder cancer. This factsheet provides detailed information about how immunotherapy works, when it's used, and what you can expect during treatment.

What Is Immunotherapy?

Immunotherapy is a type of cancer treatment that boosts or modifies the immune system's ability to target and destroy cancer cells. Unlike traditional treatments like surgery, chemotherapy, or radiotherapy, which directly target the cancer cells, immunotherapy works by enhancing your body's natural defences.

How Immunotherapy Works

Immunotherapy works by either stimulating the immune system to work harder or smarter to attack cancer cells or by providing the immune system with additional components, such as man-made immune system proteins. For bladder cancer, one of the most commonly used immunotherapy treatments is Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) therapy.

Types Of Immunotherapy For Bladder Cancer

At Birmingham Urology Centre, the following types of immunotherapy may be recommended:

- **BCG therapy:** BCG is a type of immunotherapy used primarily for non-muscle-invasive bladder cancer. It involves placing a solution containing weakened bacteria directly into the bladder through a catheter. The presence of BCG stimulates the immune system to attack the bladder cancer cells. This treatment is typically administered once a week for six weeks, with possible maintenance therapy over a longer period.
- **Immune checkpoint inhibitors:** For advanced or metastatic bladder cancer, drugs like pembrolizumab and atezolizumab are used. These drugs block proteins that prevent immune cells from attacking cancer cells, thereby enhancing the immune response against the cancer.

When Is Immunotherapy Used?

Immunotherapy can be used at different stages of bladder cancer, depending on the specific characteristics of your cancer and overall health:

- **Non-muscle-invasive bladder cancer:** BCG therapy is often used after surgery (transurethral

resection of bladder tumour, or TURBT) to reduce the risk of cancer recurrence.
- **Muscle-invasive or metastatic bladder cancer:** Immune checkpoint inhibitors may be recommended if the cancer has spread beyond the bladder or if other treatments like chemotherapy are not suitable or have been ineffective.

Benefits Of Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy offers several advantages in the treatment of bladder cancer:

- **Targeted treatment:** Immunotherapy specifically enhances the immune system's ability to fight cancer, potentially leading to more effective and longer-lasting results.
- **Fewer side effects:** Compared to chemotherapy and radiotherapy, immunotherapy generally has fewer and less severe side effects, as it works with the body's natural defences.
- **Reduced recurrence:** For non-muscle-invasive bladder cancer, BCG therapy significantly reduces the likelihood of cancer returning after surgery.

Side Effects Of Immunotherapy

While immunotherapy is generally well-tolerated, it can cause side effects, which vary depending on the type of treatment:

- **BCG therapy:** Common side effects include bladder irritation, frequent urination, and flu-like symptoms such as fever, fatigue, and muscle aches. These side effects are usually temporary and subside after treatment ends.
- **Immune checkpoint inhibitors:** Side effects may include fatigue, skin rashes, diarrhoea, and issues related to an overactive immune system, such as inflammation of the lungs, liver, or other organs. It's important to report any side effects to your oncology team, as they can provide appropriate treatment to manage these symptoms.

What To Expect During Immunotherapy

The process of receiving immunotherapy depends on the type of treatment:

- **BCG therapy:** You will receive the BCG solution directly into your bladder through a catheter. You'll need to hold the solution in your bladder for around two hours before emptying it. This treatment is typically done on an outpatient basis.
- **Immune checkpoint inhibitors:** These drugs are usually administered intravenously in a clinic or hospital setting. The infusion takes about 30-60 minutes, and you'll likely need treatment every two to three weeks.

Follow-Up Care

After completing immunotherapy, regular follow-up care is crucial to monitor your response to treatment and

check for any signs of cancer recurrence. This may involve regular cystoscopies, urine tests, and imaging scans.

Why Choose Birmingham Urology Centre

At Birmingham Urology Centre, we are committed to providing the highest standard of care in the diagnosis and treatment of bladder cancer. Our team of experienced urologists and oncologists work closely with you to develop a personalised treatment plan that includes the most advanced therapies available, such as immunotherapy. We prioritise your comfort and well-being throughout your treatment journey, ensuring you receive comprehensive care tailored to your specific needs.

Contact us

For more information about immunotherapy for bladder cancer or to schedule a consultation, please contact Birmingham Urology Centre today. Our dedicated team is here to support you at every step, providing expert care to help you achieve the best possible outcomes. Reach out to us to take control of your bladder health with confidence.