



COMBIVIR (AZT + 3TC)

WHAT IS COMBIVIR?

Combivir is a pill that contains two drugs used to fight HIV: Retrovir (zidovudine, AZT) and Efavir (lamivudine, 3TC). Combivir is manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline. A generic version manufactured by Ranbaxy was approved in 2005 for sale outside the US.

The drugs in combivir are called nucleoside analog reverse transcriptase inhibitors, or nukes. These drugs block the reverse transcriptase enzyme. This enzyme changes HIV's genetic material (RNA) into the form of DNA. This has to occur before HIV's genetic code gets inserted into an infected cell's own genetic codes.

WHO SHOULD TAKE COMBIVIR?

Combivir was approved in 1997 as an antiretroviral (ARV) drug for people with HIV infection. Combivir should not be used by children younger than 12 years old because the individual doses of AZT and 3TC cannot be adjusted.

Some people with HIV had their hepatitis B get worse after they stopped taking 3TC, a part of Combivir. Get tested for hepatitis B before you start taking Combivir to treat HIV. If you have hepatitis B and stop taking Combivir, your doctor should carefully monitor your liver function for several months.

There are no absolute rules about when to start antiretroviral therapy (ART). You and your doctor should consider your CD4 cell count, your viral load, any symptoms you are having, and your attitude about taking HIV medications. Fact Sheet 404 has more information about guidelines for the use of ART.

If you take combivir with other ARV drugs, you can reduce your viral load to extremely low levels, and increase your CD4 cell counts. This should mean staying healthier longer.

Children under 12 years old and people with kidney problems should not take Combivir.

Combivir provides two drugs in one pill. It can be more convenient to use Combivir than some other combinations of drugs. This could mean fewer missed doses and better control of HIV.

WHAT ABOUT DRUG RESISTANCE?

Many new copies of HIV are mutations. They are slightly different from the original virus. Some mutations can keep multiplying even when you are taking an ARV. When this happens, the drug will stop working. This is called "developing resistance" to the drug. See Fact Sheet 126 for more information on resistance.

Sometimes, if your virus develops resistance to one drug, it will also have resistance to other ARV. This is called "cross-resistance".

Resistance can develop quickly. It is very important to take ARV medications according to instructions, on schedule, and not to skip or reduce doses.

HOW IS COMBIVIR TAKEN?

Combivir is taken by mouth as a tablet. The normal adult dose is one tablet, two times a day. Each tablet includes 300 milligrams (mg) of Retrovir (AZT) and 150 mg of Efavir (3TC).

Combivir can be taken with food, or between meals.

The dosage of 3TC should be reduced for people who weigh less than 50 kilograms (110 pounds). People who weigh less than 110 pounds should normally not take Combivir.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

When you start any ART, you may have temporary side effects such as

headaches, high blood pressure, or a general sense of feeling ill. These side effects usually get better or disappear over time.

The most common side effects of combivir are the same as with Retrovir (AZT) and Efavir (3TC). They include headache, upset stomach, and fatigue. See Fact Sheet 551 for more information on fatigue.

The most serious side effects of AZT are anemia, granulocytopenia, and myopathy. Very few people have these side effects. If they occur, your doctor will probably have you stop using Combivir. See Fact Sheet 411 on AZT for more information on these side effects.

Anemia is a shortage of red blood cells caused by damage to bone marrow. Fact Sheet 552 has more information on anemia.

Granulocytopenia is a shortage of white blood cells caused by damage to bone marrow.

Myopathy is muscle pain and weakness. There is no specific treatment for myopathy.

HOW DOES COMBIVIR REACT WITH OTHER DRUGS?

Combivir should not be taken with ddC (zalcitabine, Hivid) or with d4T (stavudine, Zerit).

Blood levels of 3TC may be increased by bacrim or septria. See Fact Sheet 535 for more information on these drugs.

AZT's side effects may be worse if you are taking several other drugs. Be sure your doctor knows about all the medications you are taking.

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