



ABACAVIR (Ziagen)

WHAT IS ABACAVIR?

Abacavir (Ziagen®), is a drug used for antiviral therapy. It is manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline. Abacavir used to be called 1592U89. The FDA approved abacavir late in 1998.

Abacavir is a type of drug called a nucleoside analog reverse transcriptase inhibitor, or nuke. 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 ABACAVIR?

Abacavir was approved in 1998 as an antiviral drug for people with HIV infection. It has been studied in adults and children 3 months old and older. There are no absolute rules about when to start antiviral drugs. You and your doctor should consider your T-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 antiviral medications.

If you take abacavir with other antiviral drugs, you can reduce your viral load to extremely low levels, and increase your T-cell counts. This should mean staying healthier longer.

Abacavir seems to get into the central nervous system (spinal fluid). Therefore, it may help prevent mental problems such as dementia. See Fact Sheet 505 for more information on dementia.

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 antiviral drug. 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 antiviral drugs. This is called "cross-resistance".

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

Abacavir appears to work even when HIV has some resistance to other reverse transcriptase inhibitors.

HOW IS ABACAVIR TAKEN?

Abacavir is taken by mouth as a capsule. The normal adult dose is 300 milligrams (mg) two times a day or 600 mg once a day. The capsules are 300mg, so you will take 1 or 2 capsules at a time. Children take a liquid form. The amount of liquid depends on the child's body weight.

Abacavir can be taken with food, or between meals.

Abacavir is also available in Trizivir and Epzicom. Trizivir contains AZT, 3TC, and abacavir. See Fact Sheet 418 for more information on Trizivir. Epzicom contains 3TC and abacavir. See Fact Sheet 422 for more information on Epzicom.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

When you start any antiviral treatment, 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 abacavir are headache, nausea and vomiting.

HYPERSENSITIVITY REACTION

About 8% of people who take abacavir have an allergic reaction. This usually develops within two weeks of starting abacavir. However, it can appear six weeks or more after starting. Patients had the following symptoms:

- Fever (80% of patients)
- Rash (60-70%)
- Headache/feeling bad/no energy (60%)
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or stomach pain (50%)
- Cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat (20%)

If you have a hypersensitivity reaction, the symptoms will get worse each time you take a dose and will not go away until you stop taking the drug. **If you develop any of these symptoms while taking abacavir, call your doctor immediately. If you have an allergic reaction to abacavir, do not ever start taking it again.** A few allergic patients who re-started abacavir had life-threatening reactions.

If you ever stopped abacavir for any reason (for example, because you ran out), **talk to your doctor before you start again.** In rare cases, people who thought they weren't allergic had serious reactions when re-starting abacavir.

HOW DOES ABACAVIR REACT WITH OTHER DRUGS?

Abacavir is intended to be used along with other antiviral drugs. No specific interactions with other antiviral drugs have been identified yet.

The triple combination of **abacavir plus AZT (Retrovir) plus 3TC (EpiVir)** should only be used if no stronger regimen is available. The combination of **abacavir + tenofovir (Viread) + 3TC (EpiVir)** should not be used without additional anti-HIV drugs.

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