



**BC Cancer Agency**  
CARE + RESEARCH  
An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

**For the Patient: Peginterferon alfa-2a**  
Other names: **PEGASYS®**

- **Peginterferon alfa-2a** (peg in ter feer' on) is a drug that is used to treat some types of cancer. It is a clear liquid that is injected under the skin.
- Tell your doctor if you have ever had an unusual or **allergic reaction** to interferon or peginterferon before taking peginterferon alfa-2a.
- **Blood tests** may be taken regularly during treatment. The dose and timing of your treatment may be changed based on the test results and/or other side effects.
- **If you are giving your own injection at home**, use peginterferon alfa-2a exactly as directed by your doctor. Always use the same brand of interferon. Make sure you understand the directions and feel comfortable with the injections.
  - Use a different site for each injection.
  - Take the peginterferon alfa-2a out of the refrigerator and allow it to warm to room temperature before injection. Do not use heat to warm the injection.
  - Use each needle only once to avoid infection. Place used needles in a rigid plastic container with a lid. Discard container as instructed by your treatment centre. Keep out of reach of children.
- If you **miss a dose** of peginterferon alfa-2a, give yourself an injection as soon as you can if it is within 48 hours of the scheduled dose. If it is more than 48 hours since your missed dose, call the doctor to have your dosing plan adjusted.
- Other drugs such as theophylline (UNIPHYL®) and methadone (METADOL®) may **interact** with peginterferon alfa-2a. Tell your doctor if you are taking these or any other drugs as you may need extra blood tests or your dose may need to be changed. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before you start or stop taking any other drugs.
- The **drinking of alcohol** (in small amounts) does not appear to affect the safety or usefulness of peginterferon alfa-2a.
- Peginterferon alfa-2a may harm the baby if used during pregnancy. It is best to use **birth control** while being treated with peginterferon alfa-2a. Tell your doctor right away if you or your partner becomes pregnant. Do not breastfeed during treatment.
- **Store** peginterferon alfa-2a injections in the refrigerator, out of the reach of children. Do not shake or freeze.
- **Tell** doctors, dentists, and other health professionals that you are being treated with peginterferon alfa-2a before you receive any treatment from them.

## Changes in blood counts

Peginterferon alfa-2a may cause temporary changes in your blood counts. Your doctor will be following these changes carefully by performing blood tests. Adjustment of your treatment may be needed in certain circumstances.

BLOOD COUNTS	MANAGEMENT
<p>Normal white blood cells protect your body by fighting bacteria (germs) that cause infection. <b>When they are low, you are at greater risk of having an infection.</b></p>	<p>To help prevent infection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wash your hands often and always after using the bathroom.</li> <li>• Avoid crowds and people who are sick.</li> <li>• Peginterferon alfa-2a may cause fever (over 100°F or 38°C by an oral thermometer) even though you do not have an infection (see page 3). If you have fever <b>plus</b> another sign of infection, call your doctor <b>immediately</b>. These other signs include chills, cough, or burning when you pass urine.</li> </ul>
<p>Normal platelets help your blood to clot normally after an injury (e.g., cut). <b>When the platelet count is low, you may be more likely to bruise or bleed.</b></p>	<p>To help prevent bleeding problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try not to bruise, cut, or burn yourself.</li> <li>• Clean your nose by blowing gently. Do not pick your nose.</li> <li>• Avoid constipation.</li> <li>• Brush your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush as your gums may bleed more easily.</li> </ul> <p>Some medications such as ASA (e.g., ASPIRIN®) or ibuprofen (e.g., ADVIL®) may increase your risk of bleeding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not stop taking any medication that has been prescribed by your doctor (e.g., <b>ASA for your heart</b>).</li> <li>• For minor pain, try acetaminophen (e.g., TYLENOL®) first, but occasional use of ibuprofen may be acceptable.</li> </ul>

Side effects are listed in the following table in the order in which they may occur. Tips to help manage the side effects are included.

SIDE EFFECTS	MANAGEMENT
<p><b>Allergic reactions</b> may rarely occur. Signs of an allergic reaction may include flushing, rash, itching, dizziness, swelling, or breathing problems.</p>	<p>Tell your nurse if this happens while you are receiving peginterferon alfa-2a or contact your oncologist <b>immediately</b> if this happens after you leave the clinic.</p>

SIDE EFFECTS	MANAGEMENT
<b>Pain or tenderness</b> may occur where the needle was placed.	Apply cool compresses or soak in cool water for 15-20 minutes several times a day.
A <b>flu-like illness</b> commonly occurs shortly after your treatment. You may have fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and joint aches. Flu-like symptoms usually disappear on their own.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take acetaminophen (e.g., TYLENOL®) every 4-6 hours if needed, to a maximum of 4 g (4000 mg) per day.</li> <li>• Fever (over 100°F or 38°C by an oral thermometer) which occurs more than a few days after treatment may be a sign of an infection. Report this to your doctor <b>immediately</b>. Other signs of infection include chills, cough, or burning when you pass urine.</li> </ul>
<b>Nausea</b> and <b>vomiting</b> do not usually occur with peginterferon alfa-2a	
<b>Diarrhea</b> may sometimes occur.	<p>If diarrhea is a problem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drink plenty of fluids.</li> <li>• Eat and drink often in small amounts.</li> <li>• Avoid high fibre foods as outlined in <i>Food Ideas to Help Manage Diarrhea</i>.* </li></ul>
<b>Headache</b> may sometimes occur.	Take acetaminophen (e.g., TYLENOL®) every 4-6 hours if needed, to a maximum of 4g (4000 mg) per day.
<b>Muscle</b> or <b>joint pain</b> may sometimes occur.	You may take acetaminophen (e.g., TYLENOL®) every 4-6 hours to a maximum of 4 g (4000mg) per day or ibuprofen (e.g., ADVIL®) for mild to moderate pain. Tell your doctor if the pain interferes with your activity.
You may sometimes have <b>trouble sleeping</b> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to your doctor if you continue to have trouble sleeping.</li> <li>• This will return to normal when you stop taking peginterferon alfa-2a.</li> </ul>
<b>Loss of appetite</b> and <b>weight loss</b> sometimes occur.	Try the ideas in <i>Food Ideas to Help with Decreased Appetite</i> .*
<b>Tiredness</b> and lack of energy commonly occur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not drive a car or operate machinery if you are feeling tired.</li> <li>• Try the ideas in <i>Your Bank to Energy Savings: Helping People with Cancer Handle Fatigue</i>.*</li> </ul>

SIDE EFFECTS	MANAGEMENT
<b>Hair loss</b> sometimes occurs with peginterferon alfa-2a. Hair will grow back once you stop treatment with peginterferon alfa-2a. Colour and texture may change.	If hair loss is a problem, refer to <i>For the Patient: Hair Loss Due to Chemotherapy</i> .*

**\*Please ask your chemotherapy nurse or pharmacist for a copy.**

**STOP USING PEGINTERFERON ALFA-2A AND SEE YOUR DOCTOR OR GET EMERGENCY HELP IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE:**

- Signs of an **allergic reaction** (rare) soon after a treatment including dizziness, fast heartbeat, face swelling, or breathing problems.
- Signs of a **stroke** such as sudden onset of severe headache, eyesight changes, slurred speech, loss of coordination, weakness or numbness in arm or leg.
- Signs of an **infection** such as fever (over 100°F or 38°C by an oral thermometer), shaking chills; severe sore throat, productive cough (coughing up thick or green sputum); cloudy or foul smelling urine; painful, tender, or swollen red skin wounds or sores.
- Signs of **bleeding problems** such as black, tarry stools; blood in urine; pinpoint red spots on skin; extensive bruising.
- Uncontrolled **diarrhea**; black, tarry stools; blood or mucous in the stool; severe **abdominal pain**.
- Signs of **heart or lung problems** such as fast or uneven heartbeat, chest pain, chest pressure, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing.

**SEE YOUR DOCTOR AS SOON AS POSSIBLE (DURING OFFICE HOURS) IF YOU HAVE:**

- **Changes in mood** or impaired concentration or feelings of **depression**, anxiety, confusion, or irritability.
- Signs of **anemia** such as unusual tiredness or weakness.
- Signs of **liver problems** such as yellow eyes or skin, white or clay-coloured stools.
- Signs of **blood sugar problems** such as thirst and frequent need to pass urine.
- Signs of **thyroid problems** such as unusual weight gain or loss, feeling hot or cold, deepened voice, or unusual tiredness or weakness.
- **Changes in eyesight, eye pain, or redness.**

**CHECK WITH YOUR DOCTOR IF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONTINUE OR BOTHER YOU:**

- Headache not controlled with acetaminophen (e.g., TYLENOL®).
- Redness, swelling, pain, or sores where the needle was placed.
- Skin rash or itching.
- For diabetics: uncontrolled blood sugars.

