

Medicine: pembrolizumab (brand name: Keytruda®)

Merck Sharp and Dohme Limited

The Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) has assessed pembrolizumab for the treatment of adults with head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC). It is used either by itself or together with platinum and fluorouracil chemotherapy when the cancer has spread to other parts of the body (is metastatic) or cannot be removed by surgery (unresectable). It is used in patients whose tumours produce high levels of a protein called PD-L1. This document summarises the SMC decision and what it means for patients.

What has SMC said?

After careful consideration, SMC has accepted pembrolizumab for use under certain conditions (restricted use).

The restriction means that pembrolizumab may be used to treat patients with HNSCC as described above and that treatment can be continued for up to two years.

This SMC advice takes into account a confidential discount offered by the pharmaceutical company that improves the cost-effectiveness of pembrolizumab. In addition, SMC was able to apply a more flexible approach* in the assessment, as it is for a condition where patients are likely to have a life expectancy of less than three years with currently available treatments.

What does SMC's decision mean for patients?

If your healthcare professional thinks that pembrolizumab for use as described above is the right medicine for you, you should be able to have the treatment on the NHS in Scotland.



What is pembrolizumab used for?

Pembrolizumab is used to treat adults with head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC). Squamous cell carcinoma starts in cells called squamous cells, which are present in mucous membranes that line the mouth, nose, and throat.

How does pembrolizumab work?

Pembrolizumab is an immunotherapy. This is a type of cancer treatment that stimulates the immune system (the body's natural defence system) to fight the cancer. Some cancer cells produce proteins that switch off certain immune cells (called T-cells). Pembrolizumab attaches to these T cells, which stops the cancer switching them off, and helps the immune system fight the cancer.

*<https://www.scottishmedicines.org.uk/media/4731/pace-overview-document.pdf>

How does SMC make its decision?

SMC carefully considers every new medicine to make sure it benefits patients and is considered to be an acceptable use of the limited resources in NHSScotland.

To do this SMC consider the following:

- Evidence from the company about how well the medicine works compared with current treatments available in Scotland, in relation to how much they will cost to buy and administer.
- Information from patient groups about the potential impact of the medicine on patients and carers.
- Advice from healthcare professionals about any benefits of the new medicine compared to current treatment, along with how the new medicine is likely to be used.

When SMC assesses a medicine it takes account of the needs of all patients in NHSScotland, not just those who may be treated with the medicine under consideration.

You can find more detailed information about the SMC assessment of pembrolizumab by looking at the SMC Detailed Advice Document (SMC2257).

More information

The organisation below can provide more information and support for people with cancers of the head and neck and their families. SMC is not responsible for the content of any information provided by external organisations.

The Swallows Head & Neck Cancer Support Charity



<https://www.theswallows.org.uk>



07504 725 059

You can find out more about pembrolizumab (Keytruda®) in the European public assessment report (EPAR) summary for the public by searching for the medicine name on the European Medicines Agency (EMA) website.



<http://www.ema.europa.eu>