What You Need to Know About Injectable Treatments for MS

by ERICA WILSON

MS Injections 101

I am quite opinionated about treatments for multiple sclerosis (MS) as of late. As a newbie of two years to the MS community, I came out fighting, resolute in my stance that “I have MS, it doesn’t have me.” Well, MS challenged me in every way. It seemed that the harder I fought, MS would go in for the knockout – and win. Many times. It definitely felt like MS had me for sure.

I was unsure about whether to write this article because honestly, none of the treatments I have tried have worked for me. I thought if I could interview some folks who had tried the injections, I could get firsthand accounts and share them, but that did not go as planned. However, I will share what I have learned through a little research because what does not work for me, may very well be your saving grace!

Erica's MS Treatment Journey

When you are diagnosed with MS, you are immediately given a plethora of choices of which treatment to take. This is a most trying time because finding your treatment is a series of trial and error. I have never been one to take medicine, so having a disease that requires meds was disconcerting to me. So, I took the path of least resistance and chose Tecfidera. I figured I could manage two pills a day, one in the morning and one at bedtime and be fine.

I was pretty proud of myself, taking them faithfully, on time, every day. After you have been on the medicine for a certain amount of time, you are given magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to see if the treatment is having a positive effect on the disease. My first MRI after starting the medicine showed new and active lesions, so it was a fail for me.

I was then sent to an MS specialist who prescribed Ocrevus for me. While it has been a godsend to some, for me, it was a nightmare!

I sat through a total of two half infusions and one full infusion and did not return for the next full one six months later. It made every joint in my body ache, I felt like I had the flu for six months, and I gained 40 pounds. On top of all that, I was so tired, and I could not function.

As soon as the medicine left my body, just before my next scheduled infusion, the pain stopped, and the weight fell off in two weeks. I had energy again and my will to fight returned.

So you see, I am a little skeptical about writing this article. I am assuming that if you are reading this, you already know about MS. If you do not know, you can find an explanation about what MS is here.

What Are MS Injections?

Just as the name implies, these are MS treatments that require you or your caregiver to inject medication into your body with a needle. Below are five approved injections used to treat MS.

Types of MS Injections

- Avonex is approved for relapsing-remitting MS (RRMS), secondary-progressive MS (SPMS) and progressive-relapsing MS (PRMS) and is given in 30 micrograms once per week into the muscle (intramuscular).
- Rebif is also approved for RRMS, SPMS, and PRMS. It is given in 44 micrograms three times per week under the skin (subcutaneous).
- Copaxone is approved only for RRMS. It has not been shown to affect primary-progressive MS (PPMS) as those with PPMS do not experience relapses or remission. It is given in 20 milligrams (20,000 micrograms) doses daily subcutaneously.
- Betaseron and Extavia are both approved for RRMS, SPMS, and PRMS. They are given every other day subcutaneously in 250 microgram doses.

What Are the Side Effects of MS Injections?

I know, the aftermath is a little dramatic, but for those of us who have experienced the side effects of medicine intake, it can be quite scary. Especially when you are being told that it is not the medicine causing your symptoms. Each of the injections listed above come with their own side effects, but what they have in common are:

- Flu-like symptoms
- Injection-site reactions

More rare symptoms reported may include:

- Depression
- Elevated liver enzymes
- Mild anemia
- Low white blood cell counts
- Liver toxicity

Copaxone has also listed chest tightness, flushing and shortness of breath. These symptoms reportedly last five to ten minutes with no long term effects. If you choose injections as an option for treatment, you are advised to rotate your injection sites to minimize bruising and discomfort. Also, while skin irritations can occur with all injections, they occur more frequently with subcutaneous injections.

Tell Me Something Good

While there is no known cure for MS, the medications that have been approved do offer benefit for some. These MS injections have been shown to reduce the number of relapses and slow the progression of the disease.

While traveling this journey with MS, any day without symptoms is a good day. You know your body better than anyone. MS is different for each person. Discuss with your physician the best option to treat your MS.