

# MY EXPERIENCE WITH COVID-19 AND RITUXIMAB

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I'd like to share with you my experience of going through COVID-19 while being on the immunotherapy drug rituximab.

First, let me give you some background.

I'm a 53-year-old guy, relatively healthy and very active. In the summer of 2015, I was diagnosed with the autoimmune disorder Anti-MAG (myelin associated glycoprotein) Peripheral Neuropathy, a variant of CIDP. I also have a condition called MGUS (monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance), as do all people with Anti-MAG. I

spent two and a half years getting IVIG treatment every four weeks. The IVIG became ineffective

towards the end of 2017, at which time my neurologist and hematologist switched me to a combined chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatment of bendamustine and rituximab, also known as R-Benda. This lasted for six months, ending in May 2018. The R-Benda treatment put my condition into remission. Then I was kept on a maintenance dose of rituximab for two years, getting a

subcutaneous injection every three months. My last injection was in June.

On March 16, I started feeling like I was getting the flu. For five days I experienced quite profound fatigue and body aches. I didn't ever spike a fever, so I didn't think that I had COVID. At the time, I didn't qualify for testing, according to the Alberta Health Services online assessment. The flu-like symptoms then turned into symptoms more typical of a nasty cold. Lots of coughing and nasal discharge. Also, for the first three weeks I felt "dizzy in the head" from time to time. On March 31, Health Services agreed to test me and three days later I found out I was positive for COVID. It took a total of five weeks for my symptoms to go away, and on April 20 I was told I could come out of isolation.

Going through COVID wasn't much fun, but the good news is that I never felt like I needed medical assistance. My chest would feel tight at times, but I never felt remotely close to the point of not being able to breathe.

When I got the news, I was positive I called my hematologist to ask his opinion of what I could expect as I went through the illness. He said that being on rituximab wouldn't increase the chances of me getting COVID, nor would it influence my immune system's ability to mount the initial fight against the virus. This initial immune response is carried out by our T cells, which aren't affected by rituximab. He said the rituximab would reduce, but not eliminate, the ability of my B cells to produce antibodies against the virus.

The antibodies are responsible for two things. One is to help our body get rid of the virus after the T cells have done the bouncer's job of mounting the big fight. The other is to help protect us if we are exposed to the same virus again.

So, because I was on rituximab, he said I should expect my symptoms to linger a little longer than normal and I might be more susceptible to getting the virus again. My level of protection would be less than that of a normal person, whose antibodies would protect them from reinfection for a time.

Keep in mind that most of what my hematologist tells me goes straight over my head, but this is my best rendition of what he told me. He also said he's sure my level of fitness had a positive impact on my ability to beat the virus.

Two weeks after I had recovered from COVID, I developed bacterial pneumonia. I'd never had pneumonia before, but I believe that my 23-year-old son exposed me to it (darned kids). The doctors who treated me said they didn't know for sure if I was more susceptible to getting pneumonia because I had recently been through COVID. They said it's possible my lungs had been impacted by COVID and hadn't totally healed, and that's why I wasn't able to fight the pneumonia without antibiotics. Another contributing factor might have been that, soon after recovering from COVID, I went back to exercising vigorously, which probably wasn't a very good idea. I should have taken it slowly and let my body fully recover.

The best news is that now, not only is my condition in remission, I am taking no prescription medications.

Our journeys are all different, but from my particular experience, I think these are the important take-aways:

1. You are no more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 if you are receiving rituximab
2. It's totally possible to successfully beat COVID-19 if you are on rituximab
3. It's important to take it easy following recovery from the virus so that your body can heal properly.

I hope that you are all able to stay healthy and happy during this pandemic.