



Immunotherapy Side Effect: Colitis

What is colitis?

Colitis is when your colon is inflamed. This means your colon is swollen and irritated. The colon is the longest part of your large intestine (also called the large bowel). The colon connects to the rectum and ends with the anus.

Colitis can be caused by bacterial infections, viruses, and autoimmune disorders. It can also be a side effect of some cancer treatments, like [immunotherapy medications](#). Colitis can be severe or life-threatening and can happen at any time during treatment or even after treatment has ended.

This article will focus on colitis caused by immunotherapy medications.

How can immunotherapy cause colitis?

Immunotherapy medications stimulate (rev up) your body's immune system. In some cases, the immune system may not only attack cancer cells but may also attack healthy cells, like those in the colon.

Some immunotherapy side effects can be common and mild, while some side effects can be severe or even life-threatening. These side effects can happen at any time during treatment or even after treatment has ended. It is important to know the signs and symptoms of colitis if you had or are getting immunotherapy. These signs and symptoms are listed below.

What are the signs and symptoms of colitis?

Colitis can cause:

- Diarrhea or more bowel movements than usual.
- Blood or mucus in your stool.
- Stools that are black, tarry, or sticky.
- Severe pain, tenderness, and cramping in your abdomen (belly).
- Fever (100.4°F or 38.0°C).
- Distended (sticking out) abdomen or feeling bloated.

How is colitis treated?

Knowing what to look for and treating the symptoms of colitis early is important. Many side effects of immunotherapy are treatable, including colitis, but it is important to call your provider right away with any changes in how you are feeling.

The treatment of colitis depends on how serious your immune reaction is. Your provider may want to keep a close eye on you but may not change your treatment. You might be given medications to help with inflammation. If the reaction is severe, your treatment may be held or stopped.

When should I call my care team?

If you are taking any immunotherapy medication, you should call your care team as soon as you have any changes in how you are feeling. You should also make sure that any provider involved in your care knows you are taking an immunotherapy medication.

Remember, side effects of immunotherapy can happen during and even after your treatment ends. Read more about [immunotherapy](#) and its [side effects](#) at [OncoLink.org](https://www.oncolink.org).

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