Long-term use of antiviral drugs for recurrent herpes

Information for GP
There are now three drugs licensed for use in the long-term suppression of genital herpes - aciclovir (Zovirax) and the pro-drugs famciclovir (Famvir) and valaciclovir (Valtrex). Patients with more than 6 attacks of herpes a year are candidates for suppressive treatment. Those with fewer attacks, but who seem very distressed by them, may also benefit.

We recommend the patient continues on suppressive treatment for 6 to 12 months, then has a break for a period of assessment to monitor the natural history of recurrences. The minimum period of assessment should include at least 2 recurrences since 1 recurrence is common after stopping suppressive treatment. If the rate of recurrence is still unacceptably high, the patient can then resume for further 6-12 month periods. Some patients stay on the treatment for years with no ill-effects, although regular breaks are advisable.

Occasional breakthrough attacks can occur while on treatment but these tend to be mild. There is no need to increase the dosage for the duration of an attack. However, if breakthrough attacks are severe or frequent, the total daily dose of drug should be increased. Shorter courses of this suppressive treatment can be used to cover holidays or exams for those who are particularly anxious to avoid a recurrence but who would not need long-term suppression.

Treatment options

**Aciclovir 200mg 4 x daily** offers the best protection against recurrences. (6% of patients had a recurrence by 84 days\(^1\)).

**Aciclovir 400mg twice daily** is a good compromise between efficacy and compliance (13% of patients had a recurrence by 84 days\(^1\)).

**Famciclovir 250mg twice daily** seems slightly more effective than aciclovir 400mg bd\(^2\) (higher bioavailability).
Valaciclovir 500mg once daily is more convenient but a little less effective (31% of patients had a recurrence by day 112, compared with 90% on placebo). Experience with suppressive therapy is most extensive with Aciclovir. The safety data on patients taking long term therapy (Aciclovir) is more than 20 years. There is no clinical evidence to show that either Famciclovir or Valaciclovir is superior over Aciclovir. To conclude, Aciclovir is the drug of choice because of cost and effectiveness.

**Relative costs of antiviral drugs for treatment of herpes**

1) **ACICLOVIR**: Cost for 12 months =£195 (based on 400mg bd dosage).
2) **VALACICLOVIR**: Cost for 12 months =£747 (based on 500mg OD dosage).
3) **FAMCICLOVIR**: Cost for 12 months =£5396 (based on 250mg bd dosage).


**Our recommendations**

**First line treatment**: **Aciclovir 400 mg bd for 6-12 months.**

**Second line treatment**: If twice daily aciclovir does not suppress attacks to the patients satisfaction try aciclovir 200mg qds

**Third line treatment**: Very occasionally, due to aciclovir’s variable absorption, a pro-drug is necessary to suppress attacks successfully. Valaciclovir 500 bd is worth trying.

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**Follow-up**

We are happy to review your patient in the Department of Sexual Health if there are difficulties in achieving adequate suppression after 6-12 months.

Department of Sexual Health  
Florey and Contraceptive Services  
21A Craven Road  
Reading RG1 5LE  
Tel: 0118 322 7202  
[www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/sexualhealth](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/sexualhealth)  
[www.safesexberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.safesexberkshire.nhs.uk)

Except for public holidays, the clinic is open:  
Monday to Friday 7am – 7pm.  
Saturday 9.30 am – 11.30 am.  
The clinic is closed on Wednesday between 11am-1pm for staff training.

Newbury Sexual Health Clinic  
West Berkshire Community Hospital  
Benham Hill  
Thatcham RG18 3AS  
9.30am – 11.30am on Saturdays (excluding those with a public holiday).

We will endeavour to see everyone. However, if between 6pm and 7pm attendance is high, we may ask you to return the next day.

**This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.**

Dept. of Sexual Health, December 2019  
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