Treatment Gets Easier With Injectable Options

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Cancer patients receiving immunotherapy now have the option of brief subcutaneous injections rather than lengthy intravenous infusions. In September, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Keytruda Qlex, an injectable formulation of the blockbuster immune checkpoint inhibitor pembrolizumab, which restores T-cell activity against tumors. Like the original formulation, Keytruda Qlex is approved for multiple malignancies, including melanoma, non-small-cell lung cancer, colorectal cancer, liver cancer and triple-negative breast cancer. A Phase III trial of lung cancer patients showed that Keytruda Qlex works as well as IV infusions, with similar response rates and survival.

In September 2024, the FDA gave the nod to the first injectable checkpoint inhibitor, Tecentriq Hybreza, an injectable formulation of atezolizumab, soon followed by Opdivo Qvantig, an injectable version of nivolumab. To create injectable formulations, the drugs are combined with hyaluronidase, an enzyme that increases the permeability of tissue under the skin and enables the antibodies to be dispersed and absorbed into the bloodstream.

The injections cut treatment time from half an hour or more to mere minutes. What's more, injectable checkpoint inhibitors can be administered in a doctor's office or community clinic rather than a specialized infusion center, making treatment more accessible and convenient and letting hospitals free up limited infusion slots.