

Aldara

This is a topically applied drug which works by stimulating the body's own immune system to destroy cancer cells. It was actually first used in the treatment of genital warts.

When can Aldara be used?

It is suitable for the treatment of actinic keratoses (pre cancers) and superficial skin cancers, notably superficial BCC and Bowen's disease (SCC in situ)

How is it used?

There are various treatment regimes, but typically it is applied 5 times per week for 6 weeks for the superficial skin cancer and 3 times per week for 4 weeks for actinic keratoses.

What happens after a course of treatment?

It results in a local reaction which may at times be severe. This takes the form of redness, scabbing and possibly blistering. There may also be a general reaction in which the patient feels like they have influenza. In about 5% of cases it fails to "switch on" the immune system and no reaction occurs. The treated area will heal with some form of scar, usually leaving a slightly depressed or whitened area.

How effective is it?

This treatment is highly effective for the precancerous actinic keratoses, especially when used to treat an area (or field) where there are numerous lesions. It is about 80% effective in the treatment of superficial skin cancers.

Should it be used more often for skin cancers?

SPSSCC does not generally recommend its usage for the treatment of skin cancer as there are alternative treatments with much higher cure rates, with more than acceptable scarring and without the risk of severe local skin reaction and systemic side effects.

Does it have any disadvantages in the treatment of skin cancer?

Its main disadvantage is that it is often used inappropriately to treat thicker, invasive skin cancers, especially on the face. The recurrence rate in these scenarios is very high, and subsequent treatment is always more difficult and complicated.

Compared to other treatments, it has a relatively low cure rate, and can have severe reactions.

Further reading:

Actinic Keratoses
BCC
SCC