PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Etoposide

This information from UpToDate® Lexidrug™ explains what you need to know about this medication, including what it's used for, how to take it, its side effects, and when to call your healthcare provider.

Brand Names: US

Avopef; Toposar [DSC]; VePesid

Brand Names: Canada

GEN-Etoposide; VePesid

Warning

- Low blood cell counts have happened with this drug. If blood cell counts get very low, this can lead to bleeding problems, infections, or anemia. Sometimes, these have been deadly. If you have questions, talk with the doctor.
- If your child has a low platelet count or a low white blood cell count, talk with your child's doctor.
- Have your child's blood work and other lab tests checked as you have been told by the doctor.

What is this drug used for?

- It is used to treat cancer.

What do I need to tell the doctor BEFORE my child takes this drug?

- If your child is allergic to this drug; any part of this drug; or any other drugs, foods, or substances. Tell the doctor about the allergy and what signs your child had.
- If your child has a low platelet count or a low white blood cell count.
- If your child has any of these health problems: Kidney or liver disease.

If your child is breast-feeding a baby:

- Be sure your child does not breast-feed a baby while taking this drug. Your child may also need to avoid breast-feeding a baby for some time after the last dose. Talk with your child's doctor to see if your child needs to avoid breast-feeding a baby after the last dose.

This is not a list of all drugs or health problems that interact with this drug.

Tell the doctor and pharmacist about all of your child's drugs (prescription or OTC, natural products, vitamins) and health problems. You must check to make sure that it is safe to give this drug with all of your child's other drugs and health problems. Do not start, stop, or change the dose of any drug your child takes without checking with the doctor.

What are some things I need to know or do while my child takes this drug?

All products:

- Tell all of your child's health care providers that your child is taking this drug. This includes your child's doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and dentists.
- Your child may have more chance of getting infections. Have your child wash hands often. Avoid crowds and people with infections, colds, or flu.
- Your child may bleed more easily. Make sure your child is careful and avoids injury. Be sure your child has a soft toothbrush.
- Talk with the doctor before your child gets any vaccines. Use of some

vaccines with this drug may either raise the chance of very bad infection or make the vaccine not work as well.

- Cases of leukemia have happened in some people treated with this drug.
- If your child is of childbearing age, a pregnancy test will need to be done before starting this drug to make sure your child is not pregnant.
- Menstrual periods may stop during treatment with this drug. This may not go back to normal. People treated with this drug may go through menopause at a younger age than normal. If you have questions, talk with the doctor.
- This drug may cause your child to not be able to get pregnant later in life. Talk with the doctor.
- Sperm problems have happened while taking this drug. This may affect being able to father a child. This may go back to normal after the drug is stopped. If you have questions, talk with the doctor.

If your child is or may be sexually active:

- This drug may cause harm to the unborn baby if your child takes it during pregnancy.
- If your child may become pregnant, have your child use birth control while taking this drug. Your child will also need to use birth control for 6 months after the last dose unless you have been told otherwise. Be sure you know how long your child needs to use birth control. If your child gets pregnant, call the doctor right away.
- If your child's sex partner may become pregnant, have them use birth control while taking this drug. They will also need to use birth control for 4 months after the last dose unless you have been told otherwise. Be sure you know how long they need to use birth control. If your child's partner gets pregnant, call the doctor right away.

Injection:

- Some products have alcohol in them. If you have questions, talk with the doctor. Have your child be careful when doing tasks or actions that call for alertness right after getting a product that has alcohol in it. This includes

things like riding a bike, playing sports, or using items such as scissors, lawnmowers, electric scooters, toy cars, or motorized vehicles.

What are some side effects that I need to call my child's doctor about right away?

WARNING/CAUTION: Even though it may be rare, some people may have very bad and sometimes deadly side effects when taking a drug. Tell your child's doctor or get medical help right away if your child has any of the following signs or symptoms that may be related to a very bad side effect:

All products:

- Signs of an allergic reaction, like rash; hives; itching; red, swollen, blistered, or peeling skin with or without fever; wheezing; tightness in the chest or throat; trouble breathing, swallowing, or talking; unusual hoarseness; or swelling of the mouth, face, lips, tongue, or throat. Rarely, some allergic reactions have been deadly.
- Signs of infection like fever, chills, very bad sore throat, ear or sinus pain, cough, more sputum or change in color of sputum, pain with passing urine, mouth sores, or wound that will not heal.
- Signs of bleeding like throwing up or coughing up blood; vomit that looks like coffee grounds; blood in the urine; black, red, or tarry stools; bleeding from the gums; abnormal vaginal bleeding; bruises without a cause or that get bigger; or bleeding you cannot stop.
- Signs of a very bad skin reaction (Stevens-Johnson syndrome/toxic epidermal necrolysis) like red, swollen, blistered, or peeling skin (with or without fever); red or irritated eyes; or sores in the mouth, throat, nose, or eyes.
- Signs of high or low blood pressure like very bad headache or dizziness, passing out, or change in eyesight.
- Signs of liver problems like dark urine, tiredness, decreased appetite, upset stomach or stomach pain, light-colored stools, throwing up, or yellow skin or eyes.

- Signs of too much acid in the blood (acidosis) like confusion; fast breathing; fast heartbeat; a heartbeat that does not feel normal; very bad stomach pain, upset stomach, or throwing up; feeling very sleepy; shortness of breath; or feeling very tired or weak.
- A fast heartbeat.
- Flushing.
- Sweating a lot.
- Blue or gray skin color.
- Back pain.
- A burning, numbness, or tingling feeling that is not normal.
- Seizures.
- Change in eyesight.
- Trouble swallowing.

Injection:

- This drug may cause tissue damage if the drug leaks from the vein. Tell your child's nurse if your child has any redness, burning, pain, swelling, blisters, skin sores, or leaking of fluid where the drug is going into your child's body.

What are some other side effects of this drug?

All drugs may cause side effects. However, many people have no side effects or only have minor side effects. Call your child's doctor or get medical help if any of these side effects or any other side effects bother your child or do not go away:

- Hair loss.
- Feeling tired or weak.
- Mouth irritation or mouth sores.
- Constipation.
- Stomach pain.

- Change in taste.
- Diarrhea, throwing up, upset stomach, and decreased appetite are common with this drug. If these happen, talk with your child's doctor about ways to lower these side effects. Call your child's doctor right away if any of these effects bother your child, do not get better, or are severe.

These are not all of the side effects that may occur. If you have questions about side effects, call your child's doctor. Call your child's doctor for medical advice about side effects.

You may report side effects to your national health agency.

How is this drug best given?

Give this drug as ordered by your child's doctor. Read all information given to you. Follow all instructions closely.

Capsules:

- Some products may need to be taken on an empty stomach. Check with the pharmacist about how to give this drug to your child.
- Keep giving this drug to your child as you have been told by your child's doctor or other health care provider, even if your child feels well.
- You will need to take special care when handling this drug. Check with the doctor or pharmacist to see how to handle this drug.

Injection:

- It is given as an infusion into a vein over a period of time.

What do I do if my child misses a dose?

Capsules:

- Give a missed dose as soon as you think about it.
- If it is close to the time for your child's next dose, skip the missed dose and go back to your child's normal time.

- Do not give 2 doses at the same time or extra doses.

Injection:

- Call your child's doctor to find out what to do.

How do I store and/or throw out this drug?

Capsules:

- Some brands of this drug need to be stored in a refrigerator. Some brands of this drug need to be stored at room temperature. If you have questions about how to store this drug, talk with your pharmacist.
- Do not freeze.

Injection:

- If you need to store this drug at home, talk with your child's doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about how to store it.

All products:

- Keep all drugs in a safe place. Keep all drugs out of the reach of children and pets.
- Throw away unused or expired drugs. Do not flush down a toilet or pour down a drain unless you are told to do so. Check with your pharmacist if you have questions about the best way to throw out drugs. There may be drug take-back programs in your area.

General drug facts

- If your child's symptoms or health problems do not get better or if they become worse, call your child's doctor.
- Do not share your child's drug with others and do not give anyone else's drug to your child.
- Some drugs may have another patient information leaflet. If you have any questions about this drug, please talk with your child's doctor, nurse,

pharmacist, or other health care provider.

- If you think there has been an overdose, call your poison control center or get medical care right away. Be ready to tell or show what was taken, how much, and when it happened.

Consumer Information Use and Disclaimer

This generalized information is a limited summary of diagnosis, treatment, and/or medication information. It is not meant to be comprehensive and should be used as a tool to help the user understand and/or assess potential diagnostic and treatment options. It does NOT include all information about conditions, treatments, medications, side effects, or risks that may apply to a specific patient. It is not intended to be medical advice or a substitute for the medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment of a health care provider based on the health care provider's examination and assessment of a patient's specific and unique circumstances. Patients must speak with a health care provider for complete information about their health, medical questions, and treatment options, including any risks or benefits regarding use of medications. This information does not endorse any treatments or medications as safe, effective, or approved for treating a specific patient. UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates disclaim any warranty or liability relating to this information or the use thereof. The use of this information is governed by the Terms of Use, available at https://www.wolterskluwer.com/en/know/clinical-effectiveness-terms.

Last Reviewed Date

2026-04-08

Copyright

© 2026 UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates and/or licensors. All rights reserved.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Etoposide - Last updated on December 12, 2022

All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center



Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center