Protease Inhibitors Encyclopedia Article

Protease Inhibitors

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Protease Inhibitors

A protease inhibitor is a type of drug that cripples the enzyme protease. An enzyme is a substance that triggers chemical reactions in the body. The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) uses protease in the final stages of its reproduction (replication) process.

The drug is used to treat selected patients with HIV infection. Blocking protease interferes with HIV reproduction, causing it to make copies of itself that cannot infect new cells. The drug may improve symptoms and suppress the infection but does not cure it.

Patients should not discontinue this drug even if symptoms improve without consulting a doctor.

These drugs do not necessarily reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to others through sexual contact, so patients should avoid sexual activities or use condoms.

Protease inhibitors are considered one of the most potent medications for HIV developed so far.

This class of drugs includes indinavir (Crixivan), ritonavir (Norvir), nelfinavir (Viracept) and saquinavir (Invirase or Fortovase). Several weeks or months of drug therapy may be required before the full benefits are apparent.

The drug should be taken at the same time each day. Some types should be taken with a meal to help the body absorb them. Each of the types of protease inhibitor may have to be taken in a different way.

Common side effects include diarrhea, stomach discomfort, nausea, and mouth sores. Less often, patients may experience rash, muscle pain, headache, or weakness. Rarely, there may be confusion, severe skin reaction, or seizures. Some of these drugs can have interactions with other medication, and indinavir can be associated with kidney stones. Diabetes or high blood pressure may become worse when these drugs are taken.

Experts do not know whether the drugs pass into breast milk, so breastfeeding mothers should avoid them or should stop nursing until the treatment is completed.