

Moderator: Can you talk about the increase in cancer in lupus patients being treated with organ transplant drugs.

Dr. Esdaile: This a very interesting question: There is a small increase in skin cancer amongst patients who are on cyclophosphimide. There is a reported increase in cervical cancer and of course, the one that is very well described is urinary bladder cancer. Thus we suggest that people who have had this drug should be tested in perpetuity for bladder cancer. The other thing that is recommended and I don't know if there is a scientific basis for it, but we suggest that women on cyclophosphomide have regular mammograms. We suggest this anyway but I think we do it more insisently with women who have taken cyclophosphimide.

With MMF I don't think there is good data on whether there is an increased cancer risk. In azathioprine, it is a very low cancer risk. For all intents and purposes, if you have lupus nephritis the risk from lupus nephritis overwhelms your risk of cancer. It out ways any risk from MMF or azathioprine if you need it. And I think you should just get that nephritis under control. We know, for instance, that early treatment of lupus nephritis with immunosuppressant drugs, such as azathioprine, reduces your death rate by 80% or to put it another way if you do not get the treatment then it increases your death rate by 500%.

So take the drug, control the wretched nephritis, and last thing you should be worried about is the small increase in skin cancer. It can be dealt with by having your skin examined regularly by your doctor.