Antimyasthenics

This chapter includes those drugs used for their anticholinesterase action in the treatment of myasthenia gravis and related neuromuscular disorders. Other groups of drugs playing an important role in the management of myasthenia are the corticosteroids (p.1490) and some drugs with immunosuppressant actions discussed in the chapters on Antineoplastics (p.635) and Immunosuppressants (p.1810).

Eaton-Lambert myasthenic syndrome

Eaton-Lambert myasthenic syndrome is a rare auto-immune disease of the neuromuscular junction. Unlike myasthenia gravis (below), in which autoantibodies affect acetylcholine receptors, antibodies in Eaton-Lambert syndrome act presynaptically to reduce release of acetylcholine. Weakness mostly affects the proximal muscles, particularly those of the limbs; respiratory and ocular muscles are usually spared. Autonomic symptoms including dry mouth, constipation, and impotence are common. Over half of patients also have small cell carcinoma of the lung. Successful treatment of the tumour often leads to some improvement in symptoms.

The symptomatic treatment of Eaton-Lambert syndrome involves the use of drugs that increase the availability of acetylcholine at the neuromuscular junction. Response to treatment with *anticholinesterases* alone is poor and treatment with *amifampridine*, which increases acetylcholine release, appears to be more effective, particularly when given with an anticholinesterase such as *pyridostigmine*. The use of similar drugs such as *guanidine* and *fampridine* is limited by severe adverse effects. Low-dose guanidine has been tried with pyridostigmine where amifampridine is not readily available. Although there has been some improvement with the combination, the incidence of adverse effects, especially gastrointestinal reactions, is still high. Immunosuppressants including *azathioprine* and *corticosteroids* are also used, and unlike in treatment for myasthenia gravis, corticosteroids do not appear to induce an initial exacerbation of symptoms. Plasma exchange or high-dose intravenous *normal immunoglobulin* have been tried in patients with severe weakness.

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Myasthenia gravis

Myasthenia gravis is an auto-immune disorder characterised by defective neuromuscular transmission and consequent muscular weakness. It is caused by the formation of autoantibodies to elements of the neuromuscular junction. In most patients, antibodies to the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor are present. However, about 10 to 15% of patients have so-called 'seronegative myasthenia', in whom antibodies to other elements such as muscle-specific tyrosine kinase (MuSK) may be present instead; the proportion of such patients is much higher among those with ocular myasthenia (disease confined to the extra-ocular muscles). The thymus appears to be involved in many patients and some have a thymoma. Classifications of the disease may be based on the distribution and severity of symptoms, on the age of onset, and on the presence or absence of thymoma. Other types of myasthenia include transient neonatal myasthenia due to transplacental passage of receptor antibodies, which may persist for 1 to 6 weeks in the infants of myasthenic mothers, penicillamine-induced myasthenia, and congenital myasthenia (see under Amifampridine, p.630).

Diagnosis of myasthenia gravis.

Antibody testing remains the gold standard for diagnosis of myasthenia gravis. Patients may often be tested first for their reaction to an anticholinesterase. Intravenous edrophonium preceded by atropine (Tensilon test) is the most commonly used anticholinesterase test because of its rapid onset and short duration of action. Severe adverse effects can occasionally occur so testing should only be undertaken when facilities for endotracheal intubation and controlled ventilation are immediately available. A positive result is considered to be a rapid but temporary increase in muscle strength. Repetitive nerve stimulation is also used as a diagnostic test but, like the anticholinesterase test, is not specific for myasthenia gravis. Computed tomography or magnetic resonance imaging may be used to detect thymoma.

Treatment of myasthenia gravis.

- Symptomatic treatment is with an *anticholinesterase*; pyridostigmine and neostigmine are those most commonly used. Most patients prefer pyridostigmine as it produces less muscarinic adverse effects and has a longer duration of action, although the quicker onset of action of neostigmine may offer an advantage at the beginning of the day. The dose must be adjusted to give the optimum therapeutic response but muscle strength may not be restored to normal and some patients must live with a degree of disability. The effect may vary for different muscles and the dosage should be adjusted so that the bulbar and respiratory muscles receive optimum treatment. Generally, anticholinesterases only provide partial remission and their effects tend to diminish with continued treatment. Overdosage may lead to a 'cholinergic crisis' (see Adverse Effects of Neostigmine, p.631). Edrophonium may be employed to establish whether the patient is underdosed or overdosed.
- *Corticosteroids* are the main immunosuppressive drugs used for treatment. They are also useful in patients with ocular myasthenia, who as a group respond poorly to anticholinesterases and to thymectomy, provided that their disability is severe enough to warrant long-term corticosteroid treatment with its attendant adverse effects. Many start with low doses such as 5 to 20 mg of prednisolone daily or on alternate days, to reduce the risk of steroid-induced exacerbations of weakness, and increase the dose slowly thereafter according to response; an improvement is usually seen after a few weeks. Others use more aggressive regimens to obtain a more rapid response and start with large doses such as 60 to 80 mg of prednisolone daily. Whichever method is used, once clinical benefit has been obtained the regimen should be modified to alternate-day dosage, with the dose being slowly tapered when the patient is in remission. Patients taking corticosteroids require less anticholinesterase therapy and, if the dosage of the anticholinesterase is not reduced, an initial deterioration in the myasthenia may occur in the first few weeks of treatment (see also under Interactions of Neostigmine, p.632). It is rarely possible to withdraw corticosteroids completely but some patients may be maintained satisfactorily on as little as 10 mg on alternate days. If remission cannot be maintained on low-dose prednisolone, addition of azathioprine at a dosage of 2 to 3 mg/kg daily may be considered.
- Addition of *azathioprine* to treatment may allow a reduction in the dose of both corticosteroids and anticholinesterases. Azathioprine may also be of use when corticosteroids are contra-indicated or when response to corticosteroids alone is insufficient, but it has a much slower onset of action than corticosteroids and is not usually used alone. *Ciclosporin* is effective in some patients unresponsive to standard combinations but serious adverse effects including nephrotoxicity may limit its use; the time to response is similar to that with corticosteroids. Other drugs such as *cyclophosphamide* and *methotrexate* have also been tried and benefit has been reported with *mycophenolate mofetil* and *tacrolimus*. However, a recent systematic review has found that only a small number of randomised controlled studies have been conducted on the use of immunosuppressive drugs for myasthenia gravis and most have been short-term. The review of this limited evidence concluded that, apart from cyclophosphamide used alone or ciclosporin used alone or with corticosteroids, there was no clear evidence of benefit from use of other immunosuppressants.
- Plasma exchange provides a dramatic but short-lived improvement and is useful as a short-term measure in myasthenic crisis to improve ill patients while other therapies take effect, but there is no evidence that repeated plasma exchange combined with immunosuppression is superior to immunosuppression alone. A similar short-term benefit has been seen from the use of high-dose intravenous *normal immunoglobulins*; however, a systematic review considered further study to be warranted.
- Thymectomy may be offered to all patients sufficiently fit to undergo surgery unless they have minimal symptoms, purely ocular disease, or late onset or seronegative disease. Thymectomy is usually avoided in prepubertal children because of concern over the effect on growth and the developing immune system; it has been suggested that symptomatic treatment with anticholinesterases should be continued until adolescence, when the disease often improves spontaneously. After thymectomy, remission or improvement may be expected in about 80% of patients without thymomas, although this may take some years; the response is poorer in those with thymomas.

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Ambenonium Chloride *(BAN, rINN)*

Ambenonii Chloridum; Ambénonium, Chlorure d'; Ambenoniumklorid; Ambenoniumkloridi; Ambestigmini Chloridum; Cloruro de ambenonio; Win-8077. *N,N'*-Oxalylbis(*N*-2-aminoethyl-*N*-2-chlorobenzyldiethylammonium) dichloride.

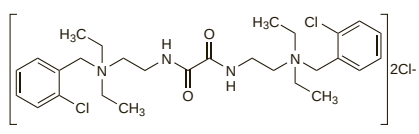
Амбенония Хлорид

$C_{28}H_{42}Cl_4N_4O_2$ = 608.5.

CAS — 7648-98-8 (ambenonium); 115-79-7 (anhydrous ambenonium chloride); 52022-31-8 (ambenonium chloride tetrahydrate).

ATC — N07AA30.

ATC Vet — QN07AA30.



Pharmacopoeias. In *Jpn.*

Adverse Effects, Treatment, and Precautions

As for Neostigmine, p.631.

Ambenonium produces fewer muscarinic adverse effects than neostigmine. As there is only slight warning of overdosage, routine use of atropine with ambenonium is contra-indicated be-