IMMUNOSUPPRESSION

Immunosuppression using one or more of the available agents is effective in nearly all patients with MG. The choice of drugs or other immunomodulatory treatments should be guided by the relative benefits and risks for the individual patient and the urgency of treatment. It is helpful to develop a treatment plan based on short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term objectives. For example, if immediate improvement is essential either because of the severity of weakness or because of the patient's need to return to activity as soon as possible, IVIg should be administered or plasmapheresis should be undertaken. For the intermediate term, glucocorticoids and cyclosporine or tacrolimus generally produce clinical improvement within a period of 1–3 months. The beneficial effects of azathioprine and mycophenolate mofetil usually begin after many months (as long as a year), but these drugs have advantages for the long-term treatment of patients with MG. There is a growing body of evidence that rituximab is effective in many MG patients, especially those with MuSK antibody.

Glucocorticoid Therapy Glucocorticoids, when used properly, produce improvement in myasthenic weakness in the great majority of patients. To minimize adverse side effects, prednisone should be given in a single dose rather than in divided doses throughout the day. The initial dose should be relatively low (15–25 mg/d) to avoid the early weakening that occurs in up to one-third of patients treated initially with a high-dose regimen. The dose is increased stepwise, as tolerated by the patient (usually by 5 mg/d at 2- to 3-day intervals), until there is marked clinical improvement or a dose of 50–60 mg/d is reached. This dose is maintained for 1–3 months and then is gradually modified to an alternate-day regimen over the course of an additional 1–3 months; the goal is to reduce the dose on the "off day" to zero or to a minimal level. Generally, patients begin to improve within a few weeks after reaching the maximum dose, and improvement continues to progress for months or years. The prednisone dosage may gradually be reduced, but usually months or years may be needed to determine the minimum effective dose, and close monitoring is required. Few patients are able to do without immunosuppressive agents entirely. Patients on long-term glucocorticoid therapy must be followed carefully to prevent or treat adverse side effects. The most common errors in glucocorticoid treatment of myasthenic patients include (1) insufficient persistence—improvement may be delayed and gradual; (2) tapering the dosage too early, too rapidly, or excessively; and (3) lack of attention to prevention and treatment of side effects.

The management of patients treated with glucocorticoids is discussed in Chap. 406.

Other Immunosuppressive Drugs Mycophenolate mofetil, azathioprine, cyclosporine, tacrolimus, rituximab, and occasionally cyclophosphamide are effective in many patients, either alone or in various combinations.

Mycophenolate mofetil has become one of the most widely used drugs in the treatment of MG because of its effectiveness and relative lack of side effects. A dose of 1–1.5 g bid is recommended. Its mechanism of action involves inhibition of purine synthesis by the de novo pathway. Since lymphocytes have only the de novo pathway, but lack the alternative salvage pathway that is present in all other cells, mycophenolate inhibits proliferation of lymphocytes but not proliferation of other cells. It does not kill or eliminate preexisting autoreactive lymphocytes, and therefore clinical improvement may be delayed for many months to a year, until the preexisting autoreactive lymphocytes die spontaneously. The advantage of mycophenolate lies in its relative lack of adverse side effects, with only occasional production of GI symptoms, rare development of leukopenia, and very small risks of malignancy or progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy inherent in nearly all immunosuppressive treatments. Although two published studies did not show positive outcomes, most experts attribute the negative results to flaws in the trial designs, and mycophenolate is widely used for long-term treatment of myasthenic patients.

Until recently, azathioprine has been the most commonly used immunosuppressive agent for MG because of its relative safety in most patients and long track record. Its therapeutic effect may add to that of glucocorticoids and/or allow the glucocorticoid dose to be reduced. However, up to 10% of patients are unable to tolerate azathioprine because of idiosyncratic reactions consisting of flu-like symptoms of fever and malaise, bone marrow suppression, or abnormalities of liver function. An initial dose of 50 mg/d should be used for several days to test for these side effects. If this dose is tolerated, it is increased gradually to about 2–3 mg/kg of total body weight, or until the white blood count falls to 3000–4000/μL. The beneficial effect of azathioprine takes 3–6 months to begin and even longer to peak. In patients taking azathioprine, allopurinol should never be used to treat hyperuricemia. Because the two drugs share a common degradation pathway; the result may be severe bone marrow suppression due to increased effects of the azathioprine.

The calcineurin inhibitors cyclosporine and tacrolimus (FK506) are approximately as effective as azathioprine and are being used increasingly in the management of MG. Their beneficial effect appears more rapidly than that of azathioprine. Either drug may be used alone, but they are usually used as an adjunct to glucocorticoids to permit reduction of the glucocorticoid dose. The usual dose of cyclosporine is 4–5 mg/kg per day, and the average dose of tacrolimus is 0.07–0.1 mg/kg per day, given in two equally divided doses (to minimize side effects). Side effects of these drugs include hypertension and nephrotoxicity, which must be closely monitored. "Trough" blood levels are measured 12 h after the evening dose. The therapeutic range for the trough level of cyclosporine is 150–200 ng/L, and for tacrolimus, it is 5–15 ng/L.

Rituximab (Rituxan) is a monoclonal antibody that binds to the CD20 molecule on B lymphocytes. It has been widely used for the treatment of B cell lymphomas and has also proven successful in the treatment of several autoimmune diseases including rheumatoid arthritis, pemphigus, and some IgM-related neuropathies. There is now an extensive literature on the benefit of rituximab in MG. It is particularly effective in MuSK antibody–positive MG, although some patients with AChR antibody MG respond to it as well. The usual dose is 375 mg/m^2, given IV in 4 weekly infusions, or 1 g, given IV on two occasions 2 weeks apart.

For the occasional patient with MG that is genuinely refractory to optimal treatment with conventional immunosuppressive agents, a course of high-dose cyclophosphamide may induce long-lasting benefit by "rebooting" the immune system. At high doses, cyclophosphamide eliminates mature lymphocytes but spares hematopoietic precursors (stem cells), because they express the enzyme aldehyde dehydrogenase, which hydrolyzes cyclophosphamide. At present, this procedure is reserved for refractory patients and should be administered only in a facility fully familiar with this approach. Maintenance immunotherapy after rebooting is usually required to sustain the beneficial effect.

PLASMAPHERESIS AND INTRAVENOUS IMMUNOGLOBULIN

Plasmapheresis has been used therapeutically in MG. Plasma, which contains the pathogenic antibodies, is mechanically separated from the blood cells, which are returned to the patient. A course of five exchanges (3–4 L per exchange) is generally administered over a 10- to 14-day period. Plasmapheresis produces a short-term reduction in anti-AChR antibodies, with clinical improvement in many patients. It is useful as a temporary expedient in seriously affected patients or to improve the patient's condition prior to surgery (e.g., thymectomy).

The indications for the use of IVIg are the same as those for plasma exchange: to produce rapid improvement to help the patient through a difficult period of myasthenic weakness or prior to surgery. This treatment has the advantages of not requiring special equipment or large-bore venous access. The usual dose is 2 g/kg, which is typically administered over 5 days (400 mg/kg per day). If tolerated, the total dose of IVIg can be given over a 3- to 4-day period. Improvement occurs in ~70% of patients, beginning during