



# MDwise

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## Kidney Disease: ESA Medicines for Anemia

When you have kidney disease, you are at risk for not having enough red blood cells. This is a condition called anemia. It can make you feel weak and tired. Erythropoietin-stimulating agents (ESAs) are medicines that doctors use to treat anemia. They help you make more red blood cells. Two common ones are epoetin alfa and darbepoetin alfa.

### How do ESAs work?

ESAs are man-made forms of erythropoietin, which is a substance made by the kidneys that helps make red blood cells.

ESAs help your body make new red blood cells. They help prevent and treat anemia caused by kidney disease. People on dialysis and people who have advanced kidney disease are the most likely to need to take an ESA.

### How are they given?

ESAs are usually given as a shot under your skin 2 or 3 times a week. Some types may be given once a week, or even every other week, or less often. ESAs can also be given in an IV (a shot into the vein) during dialysis.

Your body needs iron for ESAs to work. So your doctor will likely have you take iron supplements if you use an ESA.

Your doctor will teach you how, when, and where to inject ESA. Follow these general rules:



- Keep the medicine in the refrigerator at 36 to 46 degrees. Let it come to room temperature for about 15 minutes before you measure a dose.
- Store it away from light or moisture.
- Keep ESAs out of the reach of children.
- Do not shake an ESA. This can ruin the medicine.
- Do not reuse the needles or syringes. Use a puncture-resistant container to hold the used needles and syringes. You can get a container at your doctor's office or pharmacy. Ask your doctor where to take the container for proper disposal when it is full.

### How will you know if ESA therapy is helping?

Your doctor will do a blood test called a hemoglobin and hematocrit level to see if your

red blood cell count is getting better. Talk to your doctor about how often you will need this test.

The goal is to improve your anemia over a period of weeks. It is important not to improve it too quickly or too slowly. Hemoglobin levels that are too high may increase your risk for death, heart failure, heart attack, and stroke. Talk with your doctor about your concerns. And keep all your appointments for blood tests.

Anemia makes you feel tired and weak. Once you start taking an ESA, you may start to feel better and have more energy. Your appetite also may improve.

### **Will you be able to stop taking ESAs?**

How long you take an ESA depends on the stage of your kidney disease and whether your anemia is getting better. Talk with your doctor about how long he or she expects you to need it.

### **What are the side effects?**

Ask your pharmacist about the side effects of each medicine you take. Side effects are also listed in the information that comes with your medicine.

Common side effects of these medicines include:

- Stomach pain.
- Skin rash or redness.

Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

**Call 911 right away** if you think you are having a serious reaction, such as a seizure or trouble breathing.

**Do you have any questions or concerns after reading this information?** It's a good idea to write them down and take them to your next doctor visit.



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