



No. 10 – Is drug treatment a risk worth taking?

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Title: **Is it worth the risk?**

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Many people with ITP worry about the risk of bleeding or the risk of taking drugs for ITP. Dr David Roberts of Great Staughton Surgery, Huntingdonshire tries to help us weigh up and compare risks.

The Cambridge and District Health Authority produced a document Chance and Choice which discussed the risks that we all take in life and applied it to our lifestyles. For instance, every time we cross a road we run the risk of being knocked down. We can choose to avoid this risk by staying on the same side of the road, but generally we consider it is worth crossing over.

Sometimes risks seem greater than they really are. Even though meningitis is not very common, we see a lot of patients (particularly children) for whom the worry is that they might have meningitis. Although it is unlikely, the fear of this dreadful illness makes it seem a higher risk than it really is.

Sometimes we take risks in the treatment administered for certain conditions. Most medicines have some side effects and we have to weigh up whether the risk of these is worth taking for the benefits they give. Unfortunately, the national media tend to misreport these risks. Hardly a week goes by without some scare story appearing in the newspapers. Two years ago, the media got hold of a study which suggested that the newer oral contraceptive pills doubled the risk of thrombosis in the legs. What they failed to mention is that double a very, very small risk is still very small! The end result is that thousands of women stopped taking their pills and 30,000 fell pregnant. The risk of complications from this (and the 10,000 abortions that were carried out) was much greater than would have been so from staying on the pill. Playing football regularly, carries a greater risk of dying than taking the pill! Even more important, smoking 10 cigarettes a day is more than a thousand times riskier than taking the pill. Yet many women still carry on smoking.

We can compare risks; for instance a high risk might be one in a hundred (such as the risk of death from intravenous drug abuse). Low risk might be one in ten thousand; very low, one in a hundred thousand. [For example,] the risk of developing a rash while on penicillin is very high, while the risk of suffering serious consequences of a sore throat is extremely low. It has been shown that giving penicillin for every sore throat shortens the duration of the illness by only twelve hours. Many people think that they must have treatment for what is only brief misery: is it worth the risk?

One of the latest scares to hit the media has been the question of whether HRT increases the risk of breast cancer. The most recent studies suggest that it does. But, the increased risk is very small and in addition the number of lives saved by protecting against heart

disease and thinning of the bones is considerably higher than those lost from breast cancer.

Of course, discussing the risks of taking treatment does not weigh up the benefits of reducing symptoms. All we as doctors can do is let you know what those risks are.