

Published Date:	Tuesday 14th July, 2020	Publication:	Hindustan Times [New Delhi]
Journalist:	Rhythmia Kaul	Page No:	5
MAV/CCM:	334,720/41.84	Circulation:	985,000

## REPURPOSING FOR COVID

# Itolizumab best used pre-ventilator: Data

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**NEWDELHI:** Biocon's anti-psoriasis injection Itolizumab, which was approved to treat coronavirus disease (Covid-19) on Saturday works best before a patient is put on ventilator, according to trial data released on Monday.

Older patients and those with co-morbidities such as diabetes and hypertension also recovered well after four weeks of therapy, concluded the open-label, two-arm randomized pivotal trial conducted on 30 Covid-19 patients undergoing treatment at four hospitals in Delhi and Mumbai. The median age was 51 years for patients on itolizumab and 50 years for those in the control group. Of the 30 patients enrolled for the trial around May, 20 were on itolizumab and 10 were provided best supportive care. All 20 on the itolizumab arm recovered well; and of the 10 patients in the control group, three succumbed to the disease.

The drug is being marketed under the name of Alzumab since 2013 for psoriasis, an autoimmune skin disorder. It is not a biosimilar but an original biologic therapy innovated in India for treating moderate to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome due to Covid-19. The drug is a monoclonal antibody, in this case, a man-made protein acting like human antibodies in the immune system. "Why we are excited about the trial results is because this pandemic has plunged us into a humanitarian and economic crisis. This drug has a proven safety record through seven years of use. It follows an immuno-modulatory action mechanism that down-

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grades the cytokine storm (the body's hyper immune response to a disease). This virus is hyperactivating our immune system that leads to organ damage, and the drug in trials has shown to start slowing down the immune response thus saving lives," said Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, executive chairperson, Biocon.

There are three stages to Covid-19, and experts say itolizumab will have maximum benefits if it is administered in stage II when the lungs start getting affected.

Doctors investigating the safety and efficacy of the drug say that some of their other frontline staff that was down with Covid-19 were given the drug as part of off-label use because of the encouraging results. "At least 20 more people took the injection with good results in our hospital. This drug is working well and has benefited almost all patients who took it," said Dr Suresh Kumar, medical director, Delhi's Lok Nayak Hospital.

A maximum of six doses are required for treating a patient, but most patients do not need more than four. The cost per dosage (vial) is around ₹8,000. Biocon is likely to conduct more trials later on a larger sample.