3-month versus 6-month adjuvant chemotherapy for patients with high-risk stage II and III colorectal cancer: 3-year follow-up of the SCOT non-inferiority RCT

Timothy Iveson,1* Kathleen A Boyd,2 Rachel S Kerr,3 Jose Robles-Zurita,2 Mark P Saunders,4 Andrew H Briggs,2 Jim Cassidy,5 Niels Henrik Hollander,6 Josep Tabernero,7 Andrew Haydon,8 Bengt Glimelius,9 Andrea Harkin,5 Karen Allan,5 John McQueen,5 Sarah Pearson,10 Ashita Waterston,11 Louise Medley,12 Charles Wilson,13 Richard Ellis,14 Sharadah Essapen,15 Amandeep S Dhadda,16 Mark Harrison,17 Stephen Falk,18 Sherif Raouf,19 Charlotte Rees,1 Rene K Olesen,20 David Propper,21 John Bridgewater,22 Ashraf Azzabi,23 David Farrugia,24 Andrew Webb,25 David Cunningham,26 Tamas Hickish,27 Andrew Weaver,28 Simon Gollins,29 Harpreet Wasan30 and James Paul4

1Southampton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Southampton, UK
2Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
3Department of Oncology, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
4The Christie Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester, UK
5Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit, Institute of Cancer Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
6Department of Oncology and Palliative Care, Zealand University Hospital, Naestved, Denmark
7Vall d’Hebron University Hospital and Institute of Oncology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
8Australasian Gastro-Intestinal Trials Group, Camperdown, NSW, Australia
9University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden
10Oncology Clinical Trials Office, Department of Oncology, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
11Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre, Glasgow, UK
*Corresponding author tim.iveson@uhs.nhs.uk

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Plain English summary

SCOT RCT: 3-year follow-up
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Patients diagnosed with bowel cancer are likely to have surgery to remove the tumour. Patients diagnosed with a more advanced stage of the disease are then likely to be offered what is known as adjuvant chemotherapy – chemotherapy to kill any cancer cells that have already spread but cannot be seen. Adjuvant chemotherapy is usually given over 6 months using two medicines known as oxaliplatin and fluoropyrimidine. This chemotherapy has side effects of diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting, and it reduces the numbers of cells in the blood. It can also damage nerves, which causes discomfort, numbness and tingling; in some cases, this can go on for years. These side effects are more likely to develop with longer treatment. This study looked at whether or not shortening the time over which patients were given oxaliplatin and fluoropyrimidine chemotherapy reduced its effectiveness.

In this large study of over 6000 patients, half of the patients were allocated by chance to be treated for 3 months and the other half to be treated for 6 months. Reducing the time that patients had chemotherapy from 6 months to 3 months did not make the treatment less effective. When patients treated with chemotherapy over 3 months were compared with those treated over 6 months, 77% of patients in both groups were well with no detectable disease 3 years after surgery. Patients were less likely to get side effects with 3-month chemotherapy. In particular, the chance of persistent long-term nerve damage was lower, resulting in patients with 3-month chemotherapy having better health-related quality of life.

Overall, the study showed that 3-month adjuvant chemotherapy for patients with bowel cancer is as effective as 6-month adjuvant chemotherapy and causes fewer side effects.
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This report

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