Optimizing extended-release carbidopa/levodopa in Parkinson disease

Consensus on conversion from standard therapy

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Abstract

Purpose of review: To help clinicians optimize the conversion of a patient’s Parkinson disease pharmacotherapy from immediate-release carbidopa/levodopa (IR CD/LD) to an extended-release formulation (ER CD/LD).

Recent findings: Eleven movement disorders specialists achieved consensus positions on the modification of trial-based conversion guidelines to suit individual patients in clinical practice. Summary: Because the pharmacokinetics of ER CD/LD differ from those of IR CD/LD, modification of dosage and dosing frequency are to be expected. Initial regimens may be based on doubling the patient’s preconversion levodopa daily dosage and choosing a division of doses to address the patient’s motor complications, e.g., wearing-off (warranting a relatively high ER CD/LD dose, possibly at a lower frequency than for IR CD/LD) or dyskinesia (warranting a relatively low dose, perhaps at an unchanged frequency). Patients should know that the main goal of conversion is a steadier levodopa clinical response, even if dosing frequency is unchanged. Neurol Clin Pract 2017;7:86–93
Half a century after its introduction as a replacement therapy for dopamine deficiency in Parkinson disease (PD), levodopa taken in combination with a peripheral dopa-decarboxylase inhibitor such as carbidopa remains the most effective oral treatment at all stages of the disease. Nevertheless, the immediate-release formulation of carbidopa/levodopa (IR CD/LD) provides a levodopa plasma half-life of only $\frac{1}{2}$ hours, impeding the maintenance of a therapeutic drug concentration and contributing to long-term risks of motor fluctuations and dyskinesia, which are thought to eventually result from nonphysiologic intermittent stimulation of dopamine receptors. Strategies to enhance the effect of oral levodopa include the adjunctive administration of a monoamine oxidase B (MAO-B) or catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) inhibitor. Oral dosing of CD/LD as a controlled-release (CR) formulation may be problematic, owing to its erratic pharmacokinetic profile and inconsistent responses in advanced PD. For patients with severe fluctuations, continuous levodopa delivery via intestinal infusion is beneficial.

Extended-release (ER) CD/LD (marketed in the United States as Rytary) is an ER capsule formulation of oral CD/LD in a 1:4 ratio, designed to rapidly achieve therapeutic levodopa plasma concentrations and maintain them longer than IR CD/LD. Each capsule contains microbeads of IR and 2 types of ER CD/LD. The levodopa strengths are 95, 145, 195, and 245 mg per capsule. The formulation also includes tartaric acid, which appears to facilitate intestinal levodopa absorption distal to the jejunum. The clinical trials leading to US regulatory approval, granted in January 2015, utilized standardized procedures for treatment implementation. In early PD, ER CD/LD was uptitrated to fixed TID dose levels. In more advanced PD, the recommended initial regimens were based on dosage ranges of previous levodopa treatment (table 1). TID dosing was recommended for the initial conversion.

Subsequent clinical experience can now guide optimal use. In November 2015, Impax Laboratories, Inc. (Hayward, CA), the manufacturer of ER CD/LD, convened an advisory meeting devoted to a day-long exchange of views on conversion of patients from use of IR CD/LD among 11 movement disorders specialists highly experienced with ER CD/LD in clinical trials and clinical practice, involving more than 40 patients per expert. This article reports the resulting consensus positions.

**Dose conversion in clinical practice**

The conversion procedures utilized in the ER CD/LD clinical trials may be impractical in clinical practice. Roughly 60% of patients required a dosage higher than those that the trials’ conversion tables had recommended for their initial regimens. In addition, the conversion tables listed only TID regimens (although dosing up to 5 times a day was allowed). At the end of conversion, the mean dosing frequency was higher than TID (e.g., 3.6 times/d). Finally, the tables did not distinguish between patients taking evenly divided levodopa doses and those taking uneven doses (e.g., a high morning dose), either before or after conversion.

How can the ER CD/LD dosing guidelines based on clinical trials be modified to best suit the individual patient with PD? The advisory meeting considered various clinical scenarios.

**Patients with no fluctuations**

In early PD, all levodopa formulations may be expected to be effective, and a long-term advantage of any one of them over the others has not been empirically studied. Candidates for conversion to ER CD/LD might include patients prone to miss IR CD/LD doses and patients intolerant of dopamine agonists. The recommended initial dosage is 95 mg TID. If the response is suboptimal, the dosing can be uptitrated to 145 mg TID (approximating the levodopa exposure, but not the peak plasma level, produced by IR CD/LD administered TID as a 25/100-mg tablet). Further increases may be considered (e.g., for refractory tremor), by increments of 50 mg per ER CD/LD dose, on a weekly basis or slower.
**Candidates for conversion to ER CD/LD might include patients prone to miss IR CD/LD doses and patients intolerant of dopamine agonists.**

Early wearing-off, without dyskinesia As PD advances, the emergence of wearing-off may justify several treatment options supported by clinical data, such as increasing the IR CD/LD dose, decreasing the interdose interval, or adding a MAO-B or COMT inhibitor.\(^1,2\) Conversion from IR CD/LD to ER CD/LD is a novel option. If ER CD/LD is chosen, it may be desirable for the regimen to produce a peak levodopa plasma level \(C_{\text{max}}\) resembling that of the patient’s previous treatment, so as to provide similar “on” efficacy. Since the \(C_{\text{max}}\) for levodopa administered in ER CD/LD is 30% of the \(C_{\text{max}}\) for an equal dose of levodopa in IR CD/LD,\(^13\) each ER CD/LD dose would have to be approximately 3 times the patient’s previous IR dose \((3 \times 30\% = 90\%\); figure\). But since the levodopa exposure produced by ER CD/LD (as measured pharmacokinetically by area under the curve \([\text{AUC}]\)) is 70% of the AUC for IR CD/LD,\(^13\) the tripled ER CD/LD dose would approximately double the AUC of the IR dose \((3 \times 70\% = 210\%)\), permitting a substantial lengthening of the time between doses. In particular, it may permit a dosing-frequency reduction from QID to TID.

While a tripled ER CD/LD dose attains a levodopa \(C_{\text{max}}\) similar to that of an individual IR CD/LD dose, tripling of the total ER CD/LD daily dosage would be excessive. Instead, a patient’s initial ER CD/LD daily dosage can roughly double that of the patient’s previous levodopa regimen, as supported by clinical data.\(^17,18\) The general idea is to add up the patient’s daily doses of levodopa, multiply this total by 2, and divide the result by the number

### Table 1 Conversion to extended release (ER) carbidopa/levodopa (CD/LD) in clinical trials: Suggested initial regimens and initial and final dosage conversion ratios among conversion completers

| Dosage at study entry (LD, in mg/d) | Conversion from IR (ADVANCE-PD\(^17\) study; n = 393) | Suggested initial ER CD/LD dosage (LD, in mg/d) | Suggested initial ER CD/LD regimen | Initial conversion ratio (ER:IR) | Final conversion ratio (ER:IR), mean (SD) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 400-550                           | 126 (32)                                          | 855                                           | 3 capsules x 95 mg TID           | 1.6-2.1                          | 2.4 (0.7)                            |
| 551-750                           | 100 (25)                                          | 1,140                                         | 4 capsules x 95 mg TID           | 1.5-2.1                          | 2.1 (0.7)                            |
| 751-950                           | 74 (19)                                           | 1,305                                         | 3 capsules x 145 mg TID         | 1.4-1.7                          | 2.1 (0.6)                            |
| 951-1,250                         | 64 (16)                                           | 1,755                                         | 3 capsules x 195 mg TID         | 1.4-1.9                          | 2.1 (0.6)                            |
| 1,251-1,650                       | 23 (6)                                            | 2,205 or 2,340                               | 3 capsules x 245 mg TID or 4 capsules x 195 mg TID | 1.3-1.9                          | 1.8 (0.7)                            |
| >1,650                            | 6 (2)                                             | 2,940                                         | 4 capsules x 245 mg TID         | ≤1.8                             | 1.5 (0.5)                            |
| Conversion from CLE (ASCEND-PD\(^18\) study; n = 91) |                                                  |                                               |                                  |                                  |                                      |
| 400-550                           | 36 (40)                                           | 1,140                                         | 4 capsules x 95 mg TID           | 2.1-2.9                          | 2.8 (0.6)                            |
| 551-750                           | 29 (32)                                           | 1,470                                         | 2 capsules x 245 mg TID         | 2.0-2.7                          | 2.8 (0.8)                            |
| 751-950                           | 15 (17)                                           | 1,755                                         | 3 capsules x 195 mg TID         | 1.9-2.3                          | 2.4 (0.7)                            |
| 951-1,250                         | 10 (11)                                           | 2,205                                         | 3 capsules x 245 mg TID         | 1.8-2.3                          | 2.4 (1.0)                            |
| >1,250                            | 1 (1)                                             | 2,940                                         | 4 capsules x 245 mg TID         | ≤2.4                             | 2.5 (NA)                             |

Abbreviations: CLE = carbidopa/levodopa plus entacapone; IR = immediate release; NA = not applicable.
The primary goal is to raise the troughs and lower the peaks in plasma levodopa level, so as to minimize motor fluctuations and peak-dose dyskinesia.

of daily doses in the intended ER CD/LD regimen. The outcome is the initial conversion dose. For example, an IR total dosage of 600 mg/d would prompt an initial ER total dosage of ~1,200 mg/d, administered as 2 145-mg capsules QID or 2 195-mg capsules TID. If the patient has been using CR CD/LD (e.g., at bedtime), its contribution to the daily total can be multiplied by 0.7, in recognition that it has approximately 70% of the bioavailability of IR. Thus a regimen of IR 25/100 mg QID plus CR 50/200 mg QHS would total 100 × 4 plus 200 × 0.7, or 540 mg. If the patient has been using entacapone, each levodopa dose can be multiplied by 1.1, reflecting its enhanced bioavailability. CR CD/LD and entacapone may be discontinued upon conversion. Dopamine agonists and MAO-B inhibitors can be continued unchanged, at least initially (unless the goal is to achieve ER CD/LD monotherapy, which was not an intent in clinical trials and may not be needed in practice). Patients who continue to experience “off” episodes can be instructed to increase the initial ER CD/LD dose or decrease the interdose interval, depending on absence or presence of dyskinesia.

**Wearing-off and dyskinesia** A patient’s “off” periods may alternate, predictably or unpredictably, with “on” periods associated with troublesome dyskinesia. In consequence, a levodopa \(C_{\text{max}}\) less than that of the patient’s previous treatment may be desirable. Accordingly, each ER CD/LD dose might be 2 to 2.5 times the previous IR CD/LD dose, rather than 3 times the previous dose, even if dosing frequency is unchanged (e.g., for a patient who had been taking 5 or more IR doses per day).

Consider, for example, a patient taking 200 mg of IR CD/LD 6 times daily, who reports being “off” an hour before each dose and predictably dyskinetic half an hour after each dose. By the dosage-doubling formula described above, the patient’s daily IR CD/LD dosage, 1,200 mg, would dictate an initial ER CD/LD daily dosage of 2,400 mg. The question then is...
how to divide it. Four doses per day would mean 600 mg per dose, which might still cause peak-dose dyskinesia yet not be sufficiently frequent to bridge the patient’s “off” periods. A better alternative might be 480 mg 5 times a day. Each such dose could be taken as 2 245-mg capsules, or, as an exact match that includes 95-mg capsules to permit uptitration or downtitration, as one 195-mg capsule plus 3 95-mg capsules. A less formulaic alternative would be to dose ER CD/LD 5 times daily, but with the morning dose higher than subsequent doses (e.g., 585 mg [3 × 195 mg] for the morning dose, and 480 mg/dose [3 × 95 mg plus 1 × 195 mg] for the 4 subsequent doses). A third, conservative option would be to initially convert only the morning dose to ER CD/LD, and instruct the patient to take 200-mg IR CD/LD doses every 3 hours for the rest of the day, beginning when the ER CD/LD dose wears off. Complete conversion could subsequently be guided by the response to the morning dose.

In all of these strategies, the primary goal is not to dramatically decrease the levodopa dosing frequency, even though such a reduction may improve convenience and adherence and might also facilitate the timing of doses away from meals to reduce competition with dietary protein for intestinal absorption. The primary goal is to raise the troughs and lower the peaks in plasma levodopa level, so as to minimize motor fluctuations and peak-dose dyskinesia.

Undoubtedly, patients with complex, unpredictable fluctuations despite high doses of standard levodopa taken at very short dosing intervals are the most difficult to convert to ER CD/LD. In such cases, the hope is that the patient may improve enough to remain on oral PD management. It has been suggested that in these patients, ER CD/LD might best be initiated as a once-daily treatment each morning or perhaps each evening, with the initial aims of achieving a good response and observing how long it lasts, compared with IR CD/LD doses at other times. Opinion is divided on whether the conversion process might usefully end in a patient’s maintenance on more than one levodopa formulation. The arguments favoring full conversion are that ER CD/LD incorporates levodopa in IR form, that the new regimen would be less complicated for the patient or caregiver, and that partial conversion is not evidence-based.

| Combination of capsules | Total ER CD/LD dose, mg |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 × 95 mg               | 95                     |
| 1 × 145 mg              | 145                    |
| 2 × 95 mg or 1 × 195 mg | 190 or 195             |
| 1 × 95 mg + 1 × 145 mg or 1 × 245 mg | 240 or 245 |
| 3 × 95 mg or 2 × 145 mg | 285 or 290             |
| 2 × 95 mg + 1 × 145 mg or 1 × 95 mg + 1 × 245 mg | 335 or 340 |
| 4 × 95 mg or 2 × 195 mg | 380 or 390             |
| 3 × 95 mg + 1 × 145 mg or 3 × 145 mg | 430 or 435 |
| 5 × 95 mg or 3 × 95 mg + 1 × 195 mg or 2 × 245 mg | 475, 480, or 490 |
| 3 × 95 mg + 1 × 245 mg or 2 × 145 mg + 1 × 245 mg | 530 or 535 |
| 6 × 95 mg or 4 × 145 mg or 3 × 195 mg | 570, 580, or 585 |
| 4 × 95 mg + 1 × 245 mg | 625                    |
| 3 × 95 mg + 2 × 195 mg | 675                    |
| 5 × 145 mg or 3 × 245 mg | 725 or 735 |

*Higher-strength capsules permit reductions in number of capsules per dose, but combinations including 95-mg capsules enable the patient to self-adjust the dose.
Some general strategies

The various ER CD/LD capsules permit a physician to fine-tune a patient’s doses in approximate 50-mg increments (table 2). Dosing may also be adjusted by the addition or subtraction of a 95-mg capsule (equivalent in $C_{\text{max}}$ to a highly conservative $\sim 32$ mg of IR CD/LD; figure). Patients capable of self-adjusting their regimen can thus be forearmed with a contingency plan for doing so. For instance, their initial regimen can include one or more 95-mg capsules per dose, or can even consist entirely of 95-mg capsules. Patients who experience “off” episodes can add a 95-mg capsule to each dose, and patients who experience dyskinesia can remove a 95-mg capsule. (Some experts prefer using 145-mg capsules during uptitration and downtitration, equivalent in $C_{\text{max}}$ to $\sim 48$ mg of IR CD/LD). Once a stable and optimal response has been achieved, the maintenance regimen may be a smaller, consolidated number of capsules (table 2)—an important aid for ensuring adherence. Alternatively, patients fearing “off” episodes can be instructed to take IR CD/LD as needed. Once a pattern of extra IR use has been defined, a corresponding increase in ER CD/LD dose can be calculated.

In all conversions, clear, understandable patient education is essential. Patients or caregivers should know that the main goal of the switch is a steadier levodopa clinical response (rather than a reduction in dosing frequency, however desirable that may be). They can be instructed that an oral IR CD/LD dose peaks rapidly but only lasts about 1.5 hours, whereas an ER CD/LD dose peaks rapidly and lasts several hours, filling the troughs associated with “off” episodes and smoothing the peaks associated with dyskinesia. It may also be helpful for patients or caregivers to see the physician perform their dose-conversion calculation. As part of their expectations for the conversion process, patients should understand that the initial regimen is an estimate of the optimal treatment, and that adjustment may be required. To facilitate optimization, fluctuators should be taught to reliably recognize “off” states as well as dyskinesia. Patients can then be asked to report the duration of the “on” state produced by their initial dose level, and whether they become dyskinetic. Clinicians and medical assistants should encourage such feedback, and be prepared to act on it.

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