NCPE Assessment

Plain English Summary

October, 2026

Drug name: Pembrolizumab (pronounced pem-broh-LIH-zoo-mab) as monotherapy for the treatment of resectable, locally-advanced head and neck squamous cell carcinoma as neoadjuvant treatment, continued as adjuvant treatment in combination with radiation therapy with or without concomitant cisplatin and then as monotherapy in adults whose tumours express PD-L1 with a CPS≥1

Brand name: Keytruda ®

HTA ID: 25066

NCPE
National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, Ireland

What is the NCPE?

The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE) is a team of experts who look at the health benefits and costs of medicines. The HSE asks us to advise on whether or not a new medicine is good value for money. We give unbiased advice to help the HSE provide the most effective, safe and cost-effective (value for money) treatments for patients.

How do we make our recommendations?

Our main focus is on the health benefits and cost effectiveness of a medicine. We look at the wider costs and health benefits associated with a new medicine, for example:

- Does the new medicine work better than other treatments available in Ireland?
- Is the new medicine easier to give or easier to take compared with other treatments available in Ireland?
- Does the new medicine reduce the need for patients to be hospitalised?
- Does the new medicine improve the quality of a patient's life over other treatments available in Ireland?
- Will the new medicine save resources elsewhere within the health system?

We review the information from clinical trials along with the cost and value for money data presented by the pharmaceutical company. We ask doctors and other healthcare professionals for advice about any health benefits of the new medicine compared with current treatments. We also ask patient organisations to send us their views on how the new drug may improve patients' day-to-day experience of living with a disease.

What is pembrolizumab used for?

Pembrolizumab is a medicine used to treat many different types of cancer. This assessment focuses on its use in adults with locally advanced head and neck squamous cell carcinoma, whose tumours are suitable for surgery and produce a certain level of a protein known as PD-L1. Pembrolizumab is given before surgery (neoadjuvant treatment), and after surgery together with radiotherapy, with or without chemotherapy (adjuvant treatment). The use of pembrolizumab, in this way, is described in this report as perioperative pembrolizumab.

What recommendation has the NCPE made to the HSE?

We have recommended that the HSE should consider funding perioperative pembrolizumab if its cost effectiveness (value for money) can be improved. The HSE will consider our recommendation and make the final decision about reimbursement (funding). When making the funding decision, the HSE will also consider the additional criteria outlined in the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

Why did we make this recommendation?

We have completed a full health technology assessment of perioperative pembrolizumab. We recommend that the HSE consider providing this medicine if the HSE can agree a suitable price reduction with the pharmaceutical company. We believe that perioperative pembrolizumab may work as well or better than other ways to manage this condition.

The HSE considers a number of factors along with our recommendation when deciding whether to provide this medicine. These factors are listed in the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

Next steps

When the HSE receives our recommendation, it will look at all the relevant data about perioperative pembrolizumab. The HSE makes the final decision on reimbursement.

Where can I get more information?

You can get more information about pembrolizumab from the following online options:

- the NCPE Summary Document
- pembrolizumab European Public Assessment Report (EPAR) – Summary for the public or
- searching for pembrolizumab on our website (www.ncpe.ie);
- searching for pembrolizumab on the European Medicines Agency (EMA) website (www.ema.europa.eu).

Please refer to the NCPE website for updated information on the reimbursement status of

this medicine.