European Journal of Clinical Pharmacy

Print ISSN: 2385-409X **Online ISSN**: Applied
Website: https://farmclin.es/

Original Research Article

Safety and Efficacy of Trastuzumab Emtansine in Patients with Advanced Her2-Positive Breast Cancer

Article History:

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How to cite this article:
Sanchez-Sanz B, *et al.* Safety and efficacy of trastuzumab emtansine in patients with advanced HER2-positive breast cancer. *Eur J Clin Pharm.* 2024;6(1). 4-6

Received: 02-02-2024
Revised: 15-02-2024
Accepted: 25-03-2024
Published: 30-03-2024

Abstract: Trastuzumab emtansine (T-DM1) is an innovative antibody–drug conjugate that combines trastuzumab, a humanized anti-HER2 antibody, with the cytotoxic agent DM1. This comprehensive review explores the efficacy and safety of T-DM1 in patients with advanced HER2-positive breast cancer by synthesizing findings from clinical trials, real-world studies, and product data. The clinical impact of T-DM1 is discussed through progression-free survival, overall survival, response rates, key safety concerns, patient selection, and its place in current oncology practice.

Keywords: HER2-positive breast cancer, Trastuzumab emtansine (T-DM1), Targeted therapy, Antibody–drug conjugate, Drug resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Human Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor 2 (HER2)-positive breast cancer constitutes a more aggressive subtype, representing about 15–20% of all breast cancers and portending worse prognosis without targeted therapy. Trastuzumab emtansine (T-DM1, Kadcyla) was developed to address resistance and adverse effects associated with initial HER2-directed therapies, bridging antibody specificity and targeted chemotherapy[1][2][3].

MECHANISM OF ACTION

T-DM1 exploits the HER2-directed targeting of trastuzumab to deliver emtansine (DM1), a potent microtubule inhibitor, directly into HER2-overexpressing tumor cells. Internalization of the conjugate allows specific cytotoxic effects while retaining the antibody's anti-proliferative actions and immune-mediated benefits[1].

Clinical Efficacy

Progression-Free and Overall Survival

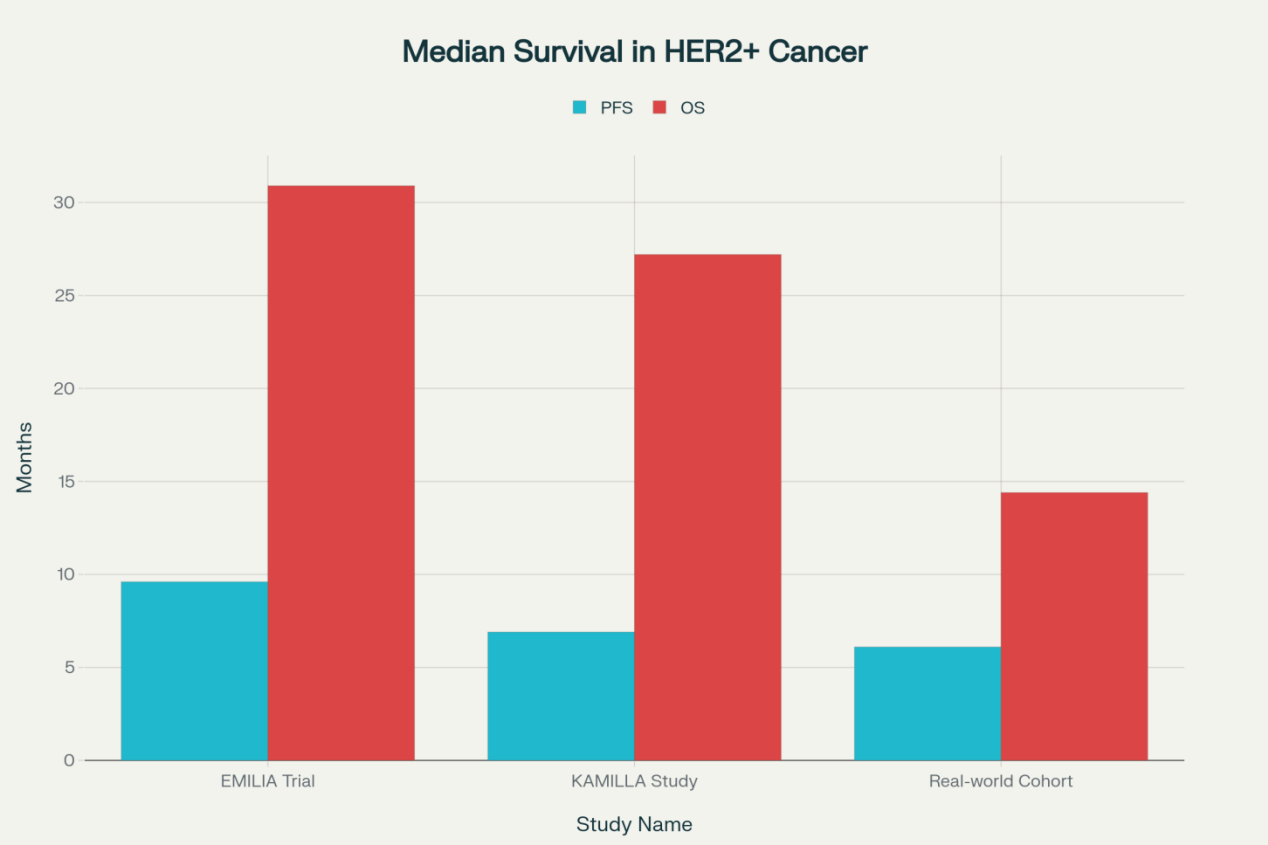
Notable phase III trials and observational studies report consistently enhanced outcomes with T-DM1 in advanced HER2-positive breast cancer:

- **EMILIA Trial**: Median progression-free survival (PFS) was 9.6 months for T-DM1 vs. 6.4 months for lapatinib-capecitabine. Median overall survival (OS) was 30.9 months on T-DM1 vs. 25.1 months in comparators. Objective response rates reached 43.6% with T-DM1[1].
- **KAMILLA Study**: In a real-world cohort of 2,002 patients, median PFS was 6.9 months and median OS was 27.2 months, even though a large proportion had received multiple prior

therapies. Those treated earlier in their metastatic course showed improved outcomes[2].

- **Real-world Evidence (2020–2022 cohort)**: Similar findings, with median PFS at 6.1 months and OS at 14.4 months; higher response rates noted among hormone receptor-positive subgroups[3].

Median survival metrics from major studies are illustrated below:



Median progression-free survival and overall survival in months from three studies of trastuzumab emtansine in advanced HER2-positive breast cancer.

Additional Efficacy Measures

- **Objective response rates** for T-DM1 typically exceed 40% in late-line settings, including complete responses in select patients[1][3].
- **Central Nervous System (CNS) Efficacy**: T-DM1 has demonstrated activity in patients with brain metastases, with manageable toxicity and meaningful response durations[2][3].

Safety Profile

Adverse Effects

T-DM1 is generally better tolerated than traditional combinations such as lapatinib-capecitabine. However, adverse events remain clinically relevant:

- **Common grade 3/4 adverse events**: Thrombocytopenia, elevated aminotransferase (liver enzyme) levels, anemia, and fatigue[1][2].
- **Non-hematologic**: Nausea, headache, musculoskeletal pain, mild infusion reactions[2][4].
- **Serious risks**: Hepatotoxicity, heart failure, and infusion-related events. Regular monitoring of liver function and cardiac status is recommended[2][4][5].
- **Other events**: Peripheral neuropathy, bleeding, and rare hypersensitivity reactions[4][5].

Incidence Rates from Major Studies

Event	EMILIA: T-DM1	KAMILLA	Common Comparators

Grade 3/4 AEs (%)	41	37.5	Lapatinib-capecitabine: 57
Thrombocytopenia (%)	12.9	2.7	1–2
Elevated Transaminases (%)	7.2	8.5	2–5
Fatigue (%)	4.2	2.5	3–5

Dosage, Administration, and Patient Selection

- **Indication**: For patients with HER2-positive advanced or metastatic breast cancer (confirmed by FDA-approved testing) who have received prior trastuzumab and taxane therapy[6][7].
- **Dosage**: 3.6mg/kg intravenous infusion every 3 weeks (21-day cycle)[6][7].
  - First infusion over 90 minutes; subsequent as tolerated over 30 minutes.
  - Continue until disease progression or unacceptable toxicity.
- **Monitoring**: Cardiac and liver function tests before and during treatment. Monitor infusion reactions closely; dose adjustment or interruption may be needed[6][7].

Real-World Application and Clinical Implications

Studies confirm the translation of T-DM1's clinical trial results into real-life practice:

- Effective even in heavily pretreated populations.
- Survival in real-world "all-comer" populations can be slightly lower, reflecting greater disease burden[3].
- CNS activity shown, representing a significant area of therapeutic need in advanced HER2-positive breast cancer[2][3].

DISCUSSION

Trastuzumab emtansine has significantly enhanced both the prognosis and quality of life for patients with advanced HER2-positive breast cancer. Its targeted design enables effective tumor-directed cytotoxicity while reducing off-target effects typical of traditional chemotherapy regimens. While T-DM1 is not without risk—principally related to hepatic, cardiac, and hematologic toxicity—its safety profile is favorable in comparison to earlier standards, and its administration guidelines aim to mitigate these risks[1][2][4][6].

CONCLUSION

The integration of trastuzumab emtansine into oncological practice has established a new standard for the management of advanced HER2-positive breast cancer, offering meaningful extensions in survival and improved patient tolerability. Ongoing real-world analysis continues to refine our understanding of optimal patient selection and management of toxicity, while further studies may help expand its role in earlier disease settings and combination regimens.

Disclaimer: This review is for informational purposes and should not substitute for medical advice or treatment by a qualified oncology specialist.

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