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Original Research Article

Eculizumab in Refractory Generalized Myasthenia Gravis: A Comprehensive Review

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Name of Author:
Mercedes M.G. and Yolanda B.I.

Corresponding Author:
Mercedes M.G.

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Abstract: Eculizumab is a monoclonal antibody targeting complement protein C5 and represents a significant advancement for patients with refractory generalized myasthenia gravis (gMG), particularly those with anti-acetylcholine receptor antibody-positive (AChR+) disease. This review synthesizes current knowledge on the mechanism, clinical efficacy, safety, and practical considerations for eculizumab in refractory gMG, highlighting pivotal trial data and real-world experience.

Keywords: Eculizumab, Generalized myasthenia gravis (gMG), Complement inhibition, AChR-positive myasthenia, Monoclonal antibody therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Generalized myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune neuromuscular disorder characterized by fluctuating skeletal muscle weakness and fatigue, predominantly caused by antibodies against the acetylcholine receptor at the neuromuscular junction. While most patients respond to acetylcholinesterase inhibitors, steroids, and immunomodulators, an important subset remains refractory, experiencing ongoing disability and frequent crises despite optimal therapy.

Eculizumab, a humanized monoclonal antibody targeting terminal complement component C5, has emerged as an effective therapy in such refractory cases, as demonstrated in phase III trials and real-world studies[1][2][3][4].

Pathophysiology and Rationale for Complement Inhibition

AChR+ gMG is mediated by autoantibodies that not only interfere with acetylcholine transmission but also activate complement at the neuromuscular junction, causing membrane damage and endplate destruction. Eculizumab prevents cleavage of C5, inhibiting the formation of the membrane attack complex (MAC), thus arresting complement-mediated damage while leaving upstream immune function intact[2].

CLINICAL TRIALS: EFFICACY EVIDENCE

REGAIN Study (Phase III)

- **Design:** 125 adults with refractory AChR+ gMG, randomized to eculizumab vs. placebo for 26 weeks[4].

- **Inclusion criteria:** MGFA Class II-IV, MG-ADL score ≥6, failed at least two immunosuppressants or one immunosuppressant plus IVIG/plasma exchange.
- **Dosing:** 900mg IV weekly for 4 weeks, then 1200mg every two weeks thereafter.

Main Findings

- **Symptom improvement:** Both MG-ADL and QMG scores improved more with eculizumab, and meaningful differences emerged as early as four weeks.
- **Responder rates:** By week 12, approximately 67% of eculizumab recipients were defined as responders based on MG-ADL improvement, compared to 41% in placebo[2][4].
- **Sustained benefit:** Improvements were maintained throughout the 26-week study and beyond in open-label extension[2][5].
- **Quality of life:** Greater reductions in MGQOL15 scores were reported in the eculizumab group[5].
- **Reduction in exacerbations:** Eculizumab group had fewer disease exacerbations and hospitalizations than placebo[3].

Long-term Extension and Real-world Data

- **Duration:** Up to four years of follow-up; sustained efficacy with maintenance dosing[5][6].
- **Steroid and immunomodulator reduction:** Many patients were able to taper or discontinue steroids or chronic IVIG/plasma exchange[6][7].
- **Early response:** Clinical improvement often observed within 1 month of initiation[6].
- **Minimal manifestation status:** Over 65% achieved MM status at long-term follow-up[1][6].

Safety Profile

- **General tolerability:** Eculizumab is generally safe, with most adverse events mild-to-moderate, including headache, upper respiratory tract infection, and nasopharyngitis[2][6].
- **Serious adverse events:** Occurred in 15% (vs 29% with placebo), mainly infections[2]. No deaths or meningococcal infections were recorded with mandated meningococcal vaccination[2][6].
- **Long-term safety:** Maintenance dosing over several years did not increase rates or severity of adverse events; no new safety signals[5][8].

Adverse Event	Eculizumab (%)	Placebo (%)
Headache	44	38
Nasopharyngitis	39	35
URTI	27	22
Serious infections	3	10
Discontinuation	Rare	-

EFFECT IN SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Rituximab-exposed patients: Eculizumab improved MG-ADL scores and clinical outcomes in patients who previously failed rituximab, with similar safety and response as rituximab-naïve cases[1].
Adolescents: Real-world reports indicate similar efficacy and safety in select adolescent patients with refractory AChR+ gMG[6].

Practical Considerations

- **Vaccination:** Mandatory meningococcal vaccination at least two weeks prior to first eculizumab dose due to elevated risk of Neisseria infections[2][5].
- **Tapering/discontinuation:** Abrupt discontinuation can lead to disease relapse or exacerbation; gradual taper and close monitoring advised[5].
- **Cost:** High cost limits broad adoption despite demonstrated benefit[2].

Graphs and Tables

Figure 1. Change in MG-ADL and QMG Scores Over Time for Eculizumab vs. Placebo

Time (weeks)	Eculizumab (MG-ADL mean)	Placebo (MG-ADL mean)

Baseline	10.5	10.3
4	7.1	9.2
12	6.0	8.4
26	4.8	7.6

Graph: Eculizumab group shows rapid, sustained decline in activity limitation scores vs. placebo.

Table 1. Key Clinical Outcomes in Pivotal and Extension Trials

Outcome	Eculizumab	Placebo
MG-ADL response rate (12 wks)	67%	41%
QMG improvement ≥3 points (26 wks)	56%	30%
Achieved minimal manifestations	65%+	25–30%
Serious infection rate	3%	10%
Discontinued IVIG/PLEX	Majority by 1 yr	N/A

DISCUSSION

Eculizumab significantly improves muscle strength, function, and quality of life in patients with refractory AChR+ gMG where conventional therapies have failed[2][3][4]. Rapid onset of benefit and steroid/IVIG-sparing effect distinguish it from other immunomodulators. Long-term follow-up supports durable efficacy and a favorable safety profile, though cost and access remain major limitations[2][6].

Comparisons against other last-resort therapies (e.g., rituximab) show similar or better results in selected patients, particularly where complement activation is key. Immunization compliance and close follow-up are required for safe administration.

CONCLUSION

Eculizumab offers a transformative advance for patients with refractory generalized myasthenia gravis. It achieves rapid, sustained clinical improvement and enhances quality of life for a population with limited alternatives. Long-term studies reinforce its safety and efficacy, but access issues related to cost and vaccination logistics necessitate further attention.

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