

Clinical Pearl: Korsuva (Difelikefalin)

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- Difelikefalin (approved in Australia as Korsuva) is the first therapy specifically indicated for moderate to severe pruritus associated with chronic kidney disease in adults undergoing haemodialysis.¹
- It is a selective kappa opioid receptor agonist thought to exert antipruritic and anti-inflammatory effects via action on peripheral sensory neurons and immune cells; its limited central nervous system (CNS) penetration gives it a favourable safety profile relative to traditional mu-opioid agents.^{1,2}
- Difelikefalin is administered as a 0.5 mcg/kg based on dry body weight, given as an IV bolus into the venous line of the dialysis circuit three times a week at the end of each haemodialysis session, making adherence straightforward since it's nurse-administered rather than patient-dosed.²
- Common adverse effects include diarrhoea, dizziness, somnolence, and nausea, and the TGA's postmarketing database has also recorded isolated reports of brain fog, limb discomfort, and pseudostroke, though causality has not been established.^{2,3}
- This drug represents a targeted option for a condition that historically lacked approved therapies, often relying on off-label antihistamines or gabapentinoids with limited efficacy.

REFERENCES:

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Difelikefalin (Korsuva): Itch Relief & Quality of Life

Pooled Phase 3 data (KALM-1 & KALM-2), n = 851 haemodialysis patients

Proportion of Patients Achieving Clinically Meaningful Improvement

Outcome Measure	Korsuva (Difelikefalin) (n = 426)	Placebo (n = 425)	p value
Itch (WI-NRS) — ≥3-point improvement, Week 12	51.1%	35.2%	<0.001
Itch (WI-NRS) — ≥4-point improvement, Week 12	38.7%	23.4%	<0.001
Skindex-10 (QoL) — ≥15-point improvement	55.5%	40.5%	<0.001
5-D Itch Scale (QoL) — ≥5-point improvement	52.1%	42.3%	0.01

All comparisons are difelikefalin vs placebo in patients on haemodialysis with moderate-to-severe pruritus.

Itch Relief

Roughly 1.5x more difelikefalin-treated patients achieved a clinically meaningful drop in itch intensity vs placebo, sustained across the study period.

Quality of Life

Improvements translated into meaningful gains on validated QoL measures (Skindex-10, 5-D Itch), reflecting reduced disease burden beyond symptom scores alone.

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Figure 1. Difelikefalin (Korsuva): Itch Relief & Quality of Life. Pooled Phase 3 data (KALM-1 & KALM-2), n = 851 haemodialysis patients. Kidney Med. 2022;4(8):100512.