

Patient briefing



Alert

1 June 2006

Understanding NPSA advice

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) helps the NHS to provide safer healthcare for everyone. This information is about the advice the NPSA has given the NHS on making sure that oral methotrexate is used safely.

Making sure you take oral methotrexate safely

Oral methotrexate is a well-established and effective medicine that can help treat many conditions. Over 50,000 patients are given oral methotrexate in the NHS each year and most people receiving it are greatly helped by it and suffer few, if any, problems. However, the NPSA has been told that some patients have been harmed because the medicine was not taken correctly.

What is oral methotrexate?

Oral methotrexate was first used to treat cancer. It is now known that low doses of the medicine can also help several joint, skin and bowel conditions. It is used to treat some types of rheumatic disease such as rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis and juvenile idiopathic arthritis, as well as severe psoriasis, and bowel diseases such as Crohn's disease. It is also used in some other conditions where the body's natural defence system is overactive.

What are the risks?

The NPSA has found that, over ten years, 25 patients in England died and 26 suffered serious harm because they did not take oral methotrexate correctly or were not monitored properly by the healthcare staff looking after them. However, most people who take oral methotrexate do not have any problems.

It is important that you are aware that oral methotrexate is a powerful medicine and that it should be taken carefully. You should be told about the possible side effects and what you should do if you experience any of them. Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will give you information about the medicine and will tell you how to avoid having problems whilst taking it.

How should I take oral methotrexate?

You must only take oral methotrexate **once a week**, on the same day each week. You will take it at home and so you must be clear about how and when you should take it. You should also have regular check-ups to make sure the medicine is working correctly.

How can I make sure I am taking oral methotrexate properly?

You should:

- read and keep the instructions that come with your tablets so that you can refer back to them;
- understand how many tablets to take;
- not confuse oral methotrexate with other medication you take more frequently;
- know what the warning signs are that the medicine is not working properly;
- be monitored properly by your doctor, nurse and/or pharmacist.



What information should I receive?

You should discuss your treatment with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before you start taking the medicine. They should give you a leaflet containing detailed information about oral methotrexate, which you should read. You should also be given a booklet that will help you and your doctor, nurse and pharmacist monitor the amount of oral methotrexate you take. This will also be used to record the results of your blood tests.

You should be given the leaflet and booklet before you start taking oral methotrexate and you should take this information with you each time you go to see your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

The doctor or nurse treating you may give you further information that explains your particular condition and treatment in more detail. You should read all the information you receive.

What should I do if I am concerned about taking oral methotrexate?

You should talk to your hospital doctor, GP, nurse or pharmacist if you have any concerns. However, it is important that you do not stop taking the medicine before speaking to them.

More information

NHS Direct
Tel: 0845 4647

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Arthritis Care
Tel: 0808 800 4050

www.arthritiscare.org.uk

National Rheumatoid
Arthritis Society
Tel: 0845 458 3969

www.rheumatoid.org.uk

Psoriasis Association
Tel: 0845 676 0076
www.psoriasis-association.org.uk

British Society for Rheumatology
Tel: 0207 842 0900
www.rheumatology.org.uk

National Library for Health
on skin conditions
www.library.nhs.uk/skin

NHS Direct Wales
Tel: 0845 4647

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Arthritis Research Campaign
Tel: 0870 850 5000

www.arc.org.uk

National Association
for Colitis and Crohn's disease
Tel: 0845 130 2233

www.nacc.org.uk

Psoriasis Arthropathy Alliance
Tel 0870 770 3212

www.thepaa.org

British Association of Dermatologists
www.bad.org.uk/public

British Society for Paediatric
and Adolescent Rheumatology
www.bspar.org.uk

The NPSA was set up by the government to improve patient safety in the NHS in England and Wales. For more information about the NPSA's work, visit www.npsa.nhs.uk