

Department of Rheumatology – Information Sheet

## What you should know about Methotrexate

Why am I being prescribed methotrexate?

Methotrexate is a drug which was first developed in the late 1930s and has been used for the treatment of psoriasis, the arthritis associated with psoriasis and rheumatoid arthritis for 25 years or so. Methotrexate is not a pain killer or an anti-inflammatory. It is called a “disease modifying drug” because it works by interfering with the way in which the white blood cells produce antibodies that in the end cause joint damage. Because of the way it works it is also used to treat some types of cancer.

When do I take methotrexate?

Methotrexate is usually taken in tablet form ONCE A WEEK on the same day each week. It should be taken with food. The tablets must be swallowed whole and should not be crushed or chewed. If you forget to take a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If it is nearly time for your next dose, miss out the one you forgot. DO NOT double up doses.

What dose do I take?

Your hospital doctor will advise you about what dose to take. Usually you will start on a low dose (for example 7.5 mg a week) but this may be increased and some patients require as much as 20mg per week. Methotrexate is made in two different strengths, 2.5mg and 10mg. The two strengths are different shapes (the 2.5mg tablets are round whereas the 10mg are capsule shaped) but are a very similar colour, so always check that you have been given the right strength by your doctor or pharmacist. *Do not take the tablets if you think you have the wrong strength. Check with your doctor or pharmacist as soon as possible.*

How long will methotrexate take to work?

Methotrexate does not work immediately and it may take 6-12 weeks before any benefit is noticed. If the treatment helps, you may be on it for months or even years. Research suggests that overall, methotrexate is less toxic and more effective than any other disease modifier.

What are the possible side effects?

As with many other drugs that you may have taken, methotrexate can have side effects. In some patients it can cause a feeling of sickness, diarrhoea, mouth ulcers, hair loss and skin rashes. Rarely methotrexate causes inflammation of the lung with breathlessness. This is normally an early side-effect, so is most unlikely to occur after 2-3 months. If you become breathless, you should contact your hospital doctor immediately.

Taking methotrexate can affect the blood count (one of the effects is that fewer blood cells are made) and can make you more likely to develop infections. If you develop a sore throat or other infection, or if you have a fever, if you develop unexplained bruising or bleeding, or if you develop any new symptoms after starting methotrexate, you should contact your hospital doctor or GP immediately.

If you have not had chickenpox but come into contact with someone who has chicken-pox or shingles, or if you develop chicken-pox or shingles while you are taking methotrexate, you should see your doctor immediately, as you may need special treatment.

Folic acid tablets are prescribed for patients who are taking methotrexate to reduce the likelihood of side effects. Dose regimes may vary but you should not take the folic acid on the day you take methotrexate. Patients who are regularly sick after every dose may be given methotrexate by injection instead.

#### Do I need any special checks while on methotrexate?

Because methotrexate can affect the blood count and sometimes cause liver problems, you will need to have regular blood checks while on this drug. When you first start taking methotrexate, you will have a blood test after one month and thereafter every 6 to 8 weeks. You may be asked to keep a record booklet with your blood test results. Bring this with you when you visit your GP and the hospital. The hospital doctor may also request you have a chest X-ray before you start treatment. You must not take methotrexate unless you are having regular blood checks.

#### Can I take other medicines along with methotrexate?

You should avoid co-trimoxazole and trimethoprim (these are antibiotics) but in the doses used for rheumatoid arthritis there are no other significant risks of interaction. In particular it is safe to take non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen or diclofenac. However it is wise to check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicine. This includes medicines you might buy at a garage, newsagent, supermarket or chemist, or any herbal and alternative remedies. These can react with methotrexate and affect your treatment. Also, the symptoms you are trying to treat may be a sign of methotrexate not working safely for you. Keep a record of any symptoms and discuss them with your doctor.

#### Does methotrexate affect fertility or pregnancy?

Methotrexate can reduce fertility and is teratogenic – that is, it may cause serious foetal abnormalities – so it must not be taken during pregnancy. If you are planning a family you (and this applies to men and women) should stop taking methotrexate, for at least 3, and preferably 6 months, before stopping contraceptive precautions. If you become pregnant while taking methotrexate, you should discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible. You should not breast feed if you are taking methotrexate.

#### Can I have immunisation injections while on methotrexate?

You should avoid immunisation injections which involve live vaccines such as polio and rubella (German Measles), yellow fever and the live typhoid vaccine. Flu vaccine and pneumovax are safe and recommended.

#### May I drink alcohol while taking methotrexate?

Alcohol may increase some of the side effects of methotrexate, including liver damage and should be restricted. Small amounts (the equivalent of 1 unit daily) are unlikely to be a problem. Discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist.

#### Where can I obtain further information?

If you would like any further information about methotrexate, or if you have any concerns about your treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist.

Remember to keep all medicines out of the reach of children.

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