

Methotrexate for Rheumatoid Arthritis

What is Methotrexate?

Methotrexate [meth-oh-TREK-seyt] is the most common medicine used for rheumatoid arthritis. Most people who take it don't have problems with it. This medicine is safe as long as you and your healthcare providers watch out for side effects.

How often do I take it?

Take methotrexate **once a week**, either as a pill or injection (shot). Studies show that it's absorbed better when taken as an injection. Taking it in the evening reduces side effects.

What side effects should I watch for?

Common side effects include:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Rash
- Mouth sores

(Note: This medicine is used at much higher doses to treat other conditions, such as cancer. Treatment goals for those conditions are very different, and the side effects are very different.)

What can I do about side effects?

Take folic acid vitamins every day to help with methotrexate side effects.

- 1 Buy it in 400 microgram (mcg) tablets and take 3 tablets daily (1,200 mcg = 1.2 mg).

OR

- 2 Get a prescription for 1 milligram (mg) tablets (1 mg = 1,000 mcg) and take 1 tablet daily.

If you still develop mouth sores or nausea, **call your healthcare provider or pharmacist**. They may recommend increasing the dose of folic acid.

How long until I start feeling better?

Methotrexate generally takes 4 to 12 weeks to take effect and improve rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.

Can I drink alcohol while taking methotrexate?

Ideally, you shouldn't drink alcohol with this medicine. If you drink alcohol, limit it to 1 to 2 drinks per week. You must stop drinking all alcohol if your liver function test becomes elevated.

What tests do I need?

You may need regular lab tests. Tests may include a liver function test (LFT), complete blood count (CBC), and creatinine [cree-AT-in-eeen] test. Your provider may recommend more frequent lab tests when you first start methotrexate and then tests every 8 to 12 weeks.

You may also need x-rays. If you have not had a chest x-ray in the last year, you need a baseline chest x-ray to check for underlying lung disease.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor if:

- You develop a new cough that doesn't get better after starting methotrexate. This could be a sign of a rare but serious complication called pneumonitis [new-mohn-I-tiss]. It generally causes fever and shortness of breath.
- You have any of the following side effects:
 - Persistent fever
 - Unexplained diarrhea
 - Sores in the mouth or on the lips
 - Stomach pain
 - Unexplained nausea or vomiting
 - Blood in your urine
 - Dark, tarry stools
 - Unusual bleeding problems

What immunizations do I need?

To stay up to date on immunizations [IM-myoo-nih-ZAY-shuns], or vaccines:

- Get your yearly flu vaccine.
- Consider Prevnar or get Pneumovax every 5 years.
- Get the hepatitis B series if you are at a high risk for the disease.
- Get a tetanus (Tdap) shot if recommended.
- Ask your doctor if you should get the shingles vaccine.

Talk to your doctor before receiving other vaccines.

Can I take methotrexate if I'm pregnant or trying to conceive a baby?

No. This medicine is not safe during pregnancy. Women need to use some form of pregnancy prevention before starting this prescription and stop taking methotrexate for 3 months before trying to get pregnant.

No evidence has shown a link between a father's use of methotrexate and birth defects.

Questions for my doctor

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