

METHOTREXATE

Why is MTX prescribed?

MTX dampens down an over-active immune system.

MTX is used in rheumatoid arthritis (RA), psoriatic arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus, and sometimes in other diseases such as vasculitis and myositis.

When and how do I take MTX?

MTX is usually taken as a tablet once a week.

Most patients take between 10mg and 25 mg (4 to 10 tablets) per week.

MTX can also be taken once a week by injection.

Folate (folic acid) reduces some of the side effects of MTX and is usually taken as one (5mg) tablet the day after MTX.

How long does it take for MTX to work?

Methotrexate doesn't work immediately

It may take 3 to 12 weeks before you start to feel better

What are the side effects?

MTX is one of the most effective and widely used medications for treating RA and other types of arthritis. It's also one of the safest arthritis drugs. As with any medication, MTX has a number of possible side effects, although they may not occur at all.

Common side effects which usually get better after a month or two of using MTX:

- Nausea (feeling sick), loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea
- Mouth ulcers, skin rash
- Headaches
- Mild hair loss
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Serious side effects are uncommon but important to know about:

- Effects on blood tests for liver function
- Reduced white blood cell and platelet numbers

- Increased risk of infections
- Shortness of breath and cough due to inflammation in the lungs

Does MTX always work?

Most patients improve on MTX. You may need to increase the dose of MTX until your joints are quiet (your doctors and you will decide this together at each visit). You may need other tablets to be added to MTX to control the arthritis. Remember that these days there are lots of treatment options – please talk to your doctors if you have questions and concerns!

How long will I need to use MTX?

Most patients take MTX for many years to control their inflammation. Unfortunately, there is no “quick-fix” or cure for most diseases. Avoid stopping MTX without talking to your doctor – it can be very difficult to control inflammation after stopping the MTX suddenly, even if MTX is restarted.

Once inflammation is controlled, it may be possible to lower the dose of MTX – talk to your doctor.

Will I need any special checks while on MTX?

Viral Hepatitis and HIV infection can affect the safety of MTX, and these will be checked before starting MTX.

Your blood cell counts, and liver function is checked before starting MTX, after the first month of treatment, and then every 4 to 6 months.

Can I drink alcohol while on MTX?

Both alcohol and methotrexate are processed in the body by the liver. If the liver is working too hard due to heavy alcohol intake, this will show up on the liver function tests and can cause liver damage. It is recommended that alcohol is used only in small amounts (less than 4 units per week).

Does MTX affect pregnancy or fertility?

Methotrexate may harm the growing baby and cause birth defects. It is very important to avoid pregnancy when taking MTX – this is for both women and men.

Please ask your doctor to recommend family planning for you. Tell your doctor if you have decided to have a baby. Your doctor will suggest other treatments for arthritis that are safe during pregnancy. It is only safe to fall pregnant three to six months after stopping MTX – so continue your family planning until then.

Can I take vaccinations while using MTX?

Vaccines work best before starting MTX, so it is a good idea to talk to your doctors about vaccines before starting any medications. The 'flu vaccine and pneumococcal vaccine are safe. Live vaccines (polio, yellow fever, chickenpox) are NOT safe for anyone using MTX.

Where do I get more information?

The SA arthritis foundation (www.arthritis.org.za, 021 425 2344) is the charity leading the fight against arthritis, and offers online or telephone advice. Talk to your rheumatologist and rheumatology nurse by phoning during clinic times ((021) 404 5394 (Friday) or 5313 (Thursday))

Tips to reduce MTX-related Nausea

Be patient! Most people find they feel less nausea over time as their body gets used to MTX.

Take MTX at night after food.

Split the dose. Some arthritis patients find that splitting the dose eases GI side effects; take half the pills in the morning and the other half 12 hours later, preferably with food.

Coffee and dark chocolate have been shown to reduce nausea – try these on your MTX day and let us know if they are helpful!

Ask about medication. For very severe nausea, your doctor can prescribe an anti-nausea drug such as maxalon (metoclopramide)

Inject MTX. When nothing else helps, switching from oral methotrexate to the injectable version can help.