

What is sulphasalazine?

This is a yellow/mustard colored oval tablet. Each tablet is 500mg.



Sulfasalazine (Salazopyrin) (SASP) is a medicine used to treat rheumatoid arthritis (RA). It is also used to treat other diseases such as psoriatic arthritis, Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. It is a combination of an aspirin-like anti-inflammatory component and a Sulphur antibiotic-like component. It is not clear how SASP works. It appears to have anti-inflammatory effects and to reduce the activity of the immune system. In RA, these actions help to reduce inflammation in the joints and thus reduce pain and swelling. It also limits damage to the joints and helps to prevent disability in the long term. Because SASP acts to reduce the damage to the joints, rather than just relieve the pain, it belongs to the group of medicines called disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs).

What benefit can you expect from your treatment?

Between 50 and 70% of people treated with SASP respond well to the treatment. This drug does not work straight away. Improvement in symptoms occurs gradually from about 6 to 12 weeks after commencing treatment.

How is sulfasalazine taken?

Sulfasalazine is taken in tablet form. Tablets should be taken with or after meals with a glass of water. They should not be broken, crushed or chewed. It is usually taken twice a day but may also be taken as a single daily dose. Treatment is started slowly, with one tablet (500mg) or two tablets a day. The dose is increased each week. This is to reduce the nausea many patients experience when they start the treatment. The usual maintenance dose is two 500mg tablets twice a day, but two 500mg tablets twice a day are sometimes prescribed. Occasionally six tablets daily may be used.

How long is treatment continued?

Treatment may be continued indefinitely as long as it is effective and no serious side effects occur. If you stop SASP treatment for more than a few weeks there is a risk that your arthritis may flare. Continue with your treatment unless advised by your doctor or unless side effects develop.

Side effects of SASP:

- The most common side effects are loss of appetite and nausea (feeling sick). These occur early in the treatment and affect up to one in three patients. These can be minimized by starting with a low dose and gradually increasing it.
- Reflux (heartburn), diarrhea and abdominal pain are also quite common.
- SASP can cause your urine and perspiration to take on an orange color. This will wash out of most clothing, but will stain some nylon fabrics. Contact lenses, particularly extended wear soft lenses, may be permanently stained. These are normal changes and do not mean you are having a reaction to the medicine.
- About 10% of people taking SASP may develop a headache or slight dizziness. Reducing the dose may reduce these effects.
- All 'sulphur' containing medicines can cause skin rashes, which may be itchy, as well as mouth ulcers. This can occur in about 10% of people. It usually resolves quite quickly once the medicine is stopped. If you have had problems in the past with medicines containing sulphur (e.g. Bactrim) or you think you may have had problems, let your doctor know.

Some people may notice an increased sensitivity to the sun. It is a good idea to apply sunscreen and to wear a hat when in the sun.

- Blood counts: SASP can cause a drop in the number of white blood cells, which are needed to fight infection. Regular blood tests aim to pick this problem up early. If you develop a sore mouth, mouth ulcers, infection or fever tell your doctor straight away. People with an inherited blood disorder called G6PD deficiency have a significant risk of blood count problems when taking SASP.
- Liver inflammation: Hepatitis (liver inflammation) may also occur. This is usually mild and does not cause symptoms, so regular blood tests are important. The problem resolves if the treatment is stopped.

In males, a lowered sperm count can occur which may result in temporary infertility. This is reversible on stopping SASP

Use with alcohol

- Because sulfasalazine can affect your liver, you should avoid heavy alcohol use while taking it. It is not known precisely what level of drinking is safe when on SASP, but there is general agreement that 1 to 2 standard drinks taken once or twice a week is unlikely to cause a problem.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

- SASP has been used safely in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

NB: If you are taking sulfasalazine you should see your doctor regularly to make sure the treatment is working and to minimise any possible side effects. Talk to your rheumatologist and rheumatology nurse by phoning during clinic times ((021) 404 5394 (Friday) or 5313 (Thursday))