

What you need to know about **5-ASA drugs** in the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease

How does maintenance treatment work?

Maintenance treatment is the long-term use of a drug to control disease symptoms and maintain remission. The family of maintenance drugs commonly used in both Crohn's and ulcerative colitis are the 5-amino salicylic acids (5-ASAs). These include specific drugs such as mesalazine (Asacol, Pentasa), olsalazine (Dipentum), balsalazide (Colazide), and sulphasalazine (Salazopyrin).

5-ASAs are thought to reduce 'flare-ups', and the recurrence of symptoms by having an anti-inflammatory effect on the lining of the bowel wall. Stopping treatment may increase the risk of a 'flare up' so it is very important that you continue to take your medication as prescribed. You should not stop taking your drugs without first discussing it with your gastroenterology doctor or specialist nurse.

If you have a flare up, the doctor/ specialist nurse may increase the dose of 5-ASAs, and in some cases add other medication to work alongside them. This could take the form of tablets, enemas or suppositories depending on the extent and severity of your disease.

How and when should I take the medication?

Most of the different types of 5-ASA drugs mentioned are available as a tablet, suppository or enema. The type of drug and dose depends on the site and severity of your disease.

Tablets should be swallowed whole with a glass of water. 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.

Enema or suppository treatments are usually prescribed for patients who have inflammation in the lower end of their bowel as the drug is given directly to the site of inflammation and can work quickly. These preparations should be used after you have had your bowels open. They can give you the feeling that you need to open your bowels again the treatment but this should ease. Once you have administered the treatment, you should try to retain it for at least 15 minutes, as the longer it stays in, the more effective it is.

Can I take other medication?

Before taking any new medication, it is important that you tell the doctor/specialist nurse of all medications that you are already taking. If you are allergic to aspirin, it is important that you mention it to the doctor before starting any of the 5-ASA drugs. This is because these drugs contain one of the active components that is also in aspirin.

Will I need to have any tests?

You will need to have to have periodic blood tests to assess your kidneys as very rarely the drugs can affect kidney function. You will be reviewed regularly in the inflammatory bowel disease clinic to assess your response to the treatment, as well as to monitor your disease.

What potential side effects are there?

All drugs can have side effects, although most patients do not notice any. Please tell your doctor or nurse straight away if you get any of the following:

- skin rash/ irritation
- headache
- abdominal pain
- nausea
- abnormal blood results
- diarrhoea
- unexplained bruising/bleeding
- persistent sore throat
- hair loss (less than 1 in 10,000 patients & usually reversible on stopping treatment)

Can I drink alcohol?

Yes, you can drink alcohol with this medication.

What if I am pregnant or planning a family?

Women planning to become pregnant should discuss their treatment options with the doctor and nurse specialist in clinic. It is generally advised that you continue to take your maintenance treatment throughout pregnancy, as an uncontrolled flare up of your disease can be more harmful to the baby than the 5-ASA drugs.

Balsalazide is not recommended in pregnancy; therefore if you are taking this you will be changed to an alternative drug.

Sulphasalazine is known to reduce sperm count in men taking the drug. On stopping the treatment the sperm count returns to normal in most men. If you are planning a family your doctor or nurse will discuss changing you to an alternative 5-ASA drug.

How long will I need to take these tablets?

5-ASA drugs are designed to be taken as maintenance treatment to prevent and treat flare-ups of your disease. You will therefore need to take the drugs for many years, even during times when you are well, as not taking them may increase the risk of you becoming unwell.

The dose of drug may be reduced if you have been well for many years but this will be discussed with you at your appointments.

What if I have any other questions?

If you have any further questions about your treatment please contact the inflammatory bowel disease specialist nurses during office hours:

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