

# What you need to know about **methotrexate** in the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease

## **What is my medicine?**

Methotrexate is an immunosuppressive drug used in inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) to reduce or stop inflammation. It is used in patients who have tried other treatments without success. Methotrexate works by acting on certain cells in your immune system to damp down the inflammation that causes your symptoms. It usually takes up to two months to have an effect.

It is also a drug that is used to treat some cancers. This does not mean there is any relation with the treatment of your inflammatory disease or the likelihood of side effects.

## **How and when should I take methotrexate?**

Methotrexate may be given by a weekly injection in the out-patient department on the same day each week, but for many patients it can be a weekly tablet. Sometimes you may suffer more side effects when the treatment is given as a tablet. In these cases your doctor or nurse will discuss the option of teaching you to self-inject into the fatty tissue of your stomach (similar to what diabetics do with insulin).

Whether you take the drug as a tablet or injection you must always have it on the same day each week. If you forget a dose, you can take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within two days of the original day.

## **Can I take other medicines?**

There are some drugs that should not be taken with methotrexate. It is important that you always tell your doctor, pharmacist or dentist that you are taking methotrexate before starting any new treatments.

Drugs you should not take with methotrexate include:

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin or ibuprofen.
- Certain antibiotics, namely cotrimoxazole, trimethoprim, penicillin, ciprofloxacin
- Anti-epileptic drugs such as phenytoin.
- Ulcer-healing drugs such as omeprazole

You should not have any live vaccines while taking methotrexate. If you need any vaccinations please check with your doctor or pharmacist first.

## **Will I need to have any tests?**

Before treatment is started you will need to have blood tests, a chest x-ray and lung function test to ensure your liver, kidneys, bone marrow and lungs are functioning correctly. You will also need a blood test to check for previous exposure to chicken pox and other underlying viruses that can affect the treatment.

You will need to have a blood test every two weeks for the first month of treatment and then monthly whilst you are taking the drug to check that the treatment is working and that it is not affecting your blood and liver.

### **Are there any side effects?**

All drugs can have side effects. For methotrexate these can range from minor to more severe. To check for these more serious effects we will monitor you closely. It is important that you tell us straight away if you experience any of the following:

- sickness (nausea)
- abdominal pain
- mouth ulcers
- headaches
- hair thinning
- sometimes methotrexate can affect the blood and liver

There is a very rare allergic reaction that causes inflammation of the lungs. Please tell your doctor if you develop unexpected shortness of breath and/or a persistent dry cough.

The skin can be more sensitive to sunlight and therefore you should avoid exposure to the sun. Use a high factor sun cream and cover up.

To reduce the side effects of methotrexate, we will prescribe you folic acid to take at least two days per week, except the day that you have your treatment.

### **Can I drink alcohol?**

It is recommended that you do not drink alcohol when taking this drug as it can have an adverse effect on your liver.

### **Will it have an effect on fertility or pregnancy?**

Methotrexate is known to reduce fertility during treatment. This affect appears to be reversible on stopping the medicine

*Please note: You should not try to start a family while taking this drug or for six months after stopping it as methotrexate can cause birth defects.*

All patients and their partners must take contraceptive precautions during treatment and for six months after stopping methotrexate. Women taking methotrexate should not breastfeed while on the drug.

### **How long will I need to take these tablets?**

You will normally need to take this medication for several months; however the length of time can vary depending on how you respond to the treatment. Methotrexate does not work for everyone and some people may have to stop treatment because of side effects.

### **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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