



COMMON MTX PRECAUTIONS

- Pregnancy must be avoided because MTX can cause miscarriage or birth defects.
- Tell every doctor and pharmacist you are using MTX. It can cause interactions with other drugs, prescription or OTC.
- Avoid sun exposure and use high-level sunscreen to prevent severe sunburn due to increased sun sensitivity from MTX.
- Since MTX reduces immune activity, common sense precautions should be taken to avoid infection.
- Alcohol use should be moderated. Some doctors recommend limiting to 2 drinks per week or eliminating alcohol entirely; others are more liberal.
- MTX may need to be discontinued before surgery or certain other medical treatments.

Your decision

Taking MTX or any other disease-modifying drug is a decision that should be made by weighing risks and benefits. The risks of untreated RD may be difficult to calculate, but can include disability and a shortened lifespan. The possible side effects of MTX may also be serious, and should be discussed with your doctor as you make your decision. You can learn more about Rheumatoid Disease at rheum4us.org.

COMMON MTX QUESTIONS:

How will I feel after I take it?

You will probably not feel any different. MTX is a slow-acting drug. If you are worried, it helps to take it after an evening meal or at bedtime.

How soon will it help my RD?

It takes about 6 weeks for MTX to effectively reduce RD symptoms. By that point, doctors usually increase the initial “low dose” to a larger “low dose” unless RD symptoms are well controlled.

Will foods I eat interfere with MTX?

There’s no need to restrict diet, but some say grapefruit should be avoided on methotrexate day.

Can I drink alcohol while taking MTX?

Some doctors advise that alcohol consumption be limited; others are more liberal. Whether modest alcohol consumption is safe for a particular individual depends upon personal history of alcohol consumption and liver health.

How long will I take MTX?

MTX only reduces disease activity as long as it’s used. Most RD has a pattern of flaring and remitting. Patients with low disease activity often continue MTX even if at a lower dose.

Can I quit taking MTX suddenly?

Yes. The body does not become dependent upon MTX. It can be stopped at any time no matter what the dose.

Footnotes:

[1] Singh JA, Furst DE, Bharat A, Curtis JR, Kavanaugh AF, Kremer JM, Moreland LW, O’Dell J, Winthrop KL, Beukelman T, et al. 2012 Update of the 2008 American College of Rheumatology recommendations for the use of disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs and biologic agents in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. *Arthritis Care & Res.* 2012 May;64(5):625-639.

[2] Ridker P. Cardiovascular inflammation reduction trial (CIRT). In: *ClinicalTrials.gov* [Internet]. Bethesda (MD): National Library of Medicine (US). 2000- 2013. Available from: <http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01594333>. NLM Identifier: NCT01594333.

[3] Westlake SL, Colebatch AN, Baird J, Kiely P, Quinn M, Choy E, Ostor AJK, Edward CJ. The effect of methotrexate on cardiovascular disease in patients with rheumatoid arthritis: A systematic literature review. *(Oxford) Rheumatology.* 2010;49(2):295-307.

[4] Morgan SL, Baggott JE, Vaughn WH, Austin JS, Veitch TA, Lee JY, Koopman WJ, Krumdieck CL, Alarcon GS. Supplementation with folic acid during methotrexate therapy for rheumatoid arthritis: A double-blind, placebo-controlled trial. *Ann of Inter Med.* 1994 Dec;121(11):833-841.

ABOUT THE RPF



*Improving the lives of people
with Rheumatoid Disease*

The Rheumatoid Patient Foundation (RPF) is a 501c(3) non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of patients with Rheumatoid Diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis and Juvenile Arthritis through a variety of means, including research, public awareness, patient education and patient-led advocacy.

For more information, to order copies of this and other brochures, or to become a Member, visit our website: <http://rheum4us.org>

RPF uses photographs donated by RD patients in all of its literature. Thanks to those who donated photos for use in this brochure.

Methotrexate: The Most Prescribed Treatment for Rheumatoid Disease



A resource guide from the
Rheumatoid Patient Foundation



WHY WAS I PLACED ON METHOTREXATE?

Methotrexate (MTX) is the most common medicine used to treat Rheumatoid Disease (RD), or Rheumatoid Arthritis, because it is effective at reducing disease activity for many patients. MTX is often called the “gold standard” for RD treatment and rheumatologists prefer it because it has been shown to suppress disease activity with limited severe or permanent side effects. Like all treatments for RD, MTX brings great relief of symptoms for some patients, and helps others somewhat.

Methotrexate is a disease treatment

MTX is a disease modifying anti-rheumatic drug (DMARD), and works by suppressing parts of the immune system, although the exact mechanism is not fully understood. It is a chemical therapy (chemotherapy drug), but it is used to treat RD in doses that are a tiny fraction of those used to treat cancer. It's important to remember that RD is a serious systemic illness that can damage joints or other parts of the body, so it is treated systemically.

MTX is often prescribed in combination with other disease modifying medications. Combination therapies are highly recommended by the American College of Rheumatology for moderate to severe RD to slow disease progression and reduce pain and inflammation.^[1] The National Institutes of Health is testing MTX as a treatment for certain types of cardiovascular disease^[2], which is significant because RD often affects the cardiovascular system^[3].

STARTING METHOTREXATE

Before you begin MTX, your doctor will run blood tests such as a complete blood count and a liver panel. You may also have a chest x-ray or a TB test. You should start taking folic acid right away because it can help prevent side effects of MTX. You'll notice that your MTX dose consists of several small pills. This is still a very low dose because each pill is only 2.5 mg. Your doctor may have you gradually increase the number of pills taken each week until you reach an effective dose.

If there is a chance of pregnancy, you'll be given a pregnancy test before you begin treatment. Pregnancy must be avoided, and birth control is often prescribed. Doctors recommend either parent stop MTX for 3 months prior to conceiving.

Taking Folic Acid

Folic acid supplementation will help prevent side effects of MTX without reducing its effectiveness.^[4] Folic acid is prescribed in doses ranging from 1 to 5 mg per day. Often, 1 mg daily is recommended, or 2 mg per day if side effects are not relieved. An over the counter (OTC) folic acid supplement should not be substituted for a prescription, because OTC doses are not required to be as consistent as prescription products. Leucovorin or folinic acid is a more potent form of folic acid sometimes used with chemotherapy in cancer patients. Folinic acid may be prescribed if side effects of MTX are not relieved by folic acid.

SIDE EFFECTS OF METHOTREXATE

Side effects are the unwelcome effects of most drugs. MTX side effects are different for each patient, and you should not expect to have every side effect listed; patients may have few or none. Side effects often lessen with time as the body adjusts to MTX. Common side effects include nausea, mild hair loss, a general feeling of being ill, greater susceptibility to sunburn, and increased difficulty fighting infection. Less frequent side effects include diarrhea, metallic taste, brain fog, rashes, blisters on hands, and sores in mouth or nose. Uncommon side effects include mood shifts, lower intestinal cramping, breast tenderness, menstrual changes, and a temporary increase in muscle or joint pain.

Your doctor will order a blood test about every 6-8 weeks to see that your liver is functioning normally. Don't skip these tests. If results are abnormal, your doctor will decide whether you should reduce or stop MTX for a time. Rarely, MTX can damage the lungs, so be sure to tell your doctors of any new symptoms you experience.

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE SIDE EFFECTS

Ask your doctor or pharmacist about ways to reduce or prevent MTX side effects. Some suggestions that have helped other patients:

- Build up MTX dose slowly.
- Take MTX in the evening so you sleep through side effects.
- Break up the dose over two different days instead of taking it all at once.
- Consider switching to MTX injections to improve stomach side effects.
- Try a stomach acid inhibitor or medication that blocks histamine receptors in the stomach.
- Try OTC nausea relief medicines, or ask your doctor for a prescription version.
- Certain foods or candies can relieve nausea or metallic taste, including hard peppermint or lemon candies and ginger or mint tea.
- Experiment with eating different foods before taking oral MTX, such as oatmeal, which may prevent stomach upset.

MTX Injections

Many patients experience fewer side effects when MTX is injected. Injections are painless and can be done with a small insulin needle. Another advantage to MTX injections is that more medication is absorbed, which may make it more effective. When the dose is over 20 mg per week, it is often changed to injection to avoid stomach upset.

