

Neurosciences

Low dose methotrexate therapy for patients with multiple sclerosis

Methotrexate is a drug used to treat conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, severe psoriasis, Crohn's disease, a disease of the bowel, and some kinds of cancers. Methotrexate can reduce inflammation and it can also reduce the activity of the immune system, the body's own defence system.

Although methotrexate is not licensed in the UK for use in MS, some studies have shown that people taking methotrexate developed disability at a slower rate than those not taking it.

The aim of methotrexate therapy is to reduce the rate of disease progression. Methotrexate will not cure MS, or improve your current symptoms, or stop MS becoming worse with time.

This leaflet is for people with MS receiving treatment at University Hospital under the care of consultant neurologist Dr Abdullah Shehu.

How to take it

Methotrexate is usually taken as a tablet. The tablets should be swallowed whole, 1 hour after food with a glass of water. Do not crush or chew the tablets.

The dose is usually 7.5mg (three 2.5mg tablets), taken together on the same day once a week. Methotrexate is usually a long-term therapy.



Patient Information

Folic acid tablets are usually prescribed to patients who are taking methotrexate as this can reduce the likelihood of side effects. Do not take folic acid on the day that you take methotrexate.

If you miss a dose

It's unlikely that a missed dose will cause a problem. If it's within two days, take your tablets as soon as you remember.

Do not take the dose if you are more than three days late, just take it on your usual day the following week.

Tell your GP, neurologist, or MS nurse if you decide to stop taking methotrexate.

If you take too many tablets

If you take more methotrexate than prescribed, seek medical advice immediately. Contact your GP or your nearest hospital casualty department.

Side effects

Most people on low dose methotrexate do not experience significant side effects. The most common side effects of methotrexate are mouth ulcers, stomach pains or nausea.

Less commonly, methotrexate can cause nausea, vomiting, dizziness, tiredness, fever, rashes, hair loss, or headaches.

Rarely, methotrexate can cause inflammation of the lungs with breathlessness. If you become breathless, stop taking methotrexate and seek medical help immediately.

Methotrexate can affect your blood and make you more likely to develop infections. If you develop any new or unusual symptoms after starting methotrexate, see your doctor as soon as possible.

Patient Information

Blood monitoring

Methotrexate can affect the production of some blood cells and make you more vulnerable to infections. Sometimes, methotrexate can cause damage to the liver and kidneys.

Before starting treatment, you need to have a blood test to provide a record of how you are and whether you are suitable for treatment. You'll then need regular blood tests whilst you're on treatment.

Blood tests will need to be monitored as follows:

- every 2 weeks for the first 6 weeks
- every 1 month for the next 3 months
- every 3 months thereafter

Do not miss your blood tests. If your blood tests find any problems, your treatment may be stopped or adjusted to prevent damage. Your blood monitoring may be managed by the hospital team or your own GP.

You cannot start methotrexate without the written agreement of your GP and your agreement to comply with regular blood tests.

Before starting methotrexate, tell your doctor if you:

- have any kidney, liver problems or blood disorders
- have stomach ulcers
- have mouth ulcers
- are pregnant, trying to become pregnant or breastfeeding
- have an infection
- are taking any other medicines, including over-the-counter medicines such as aspirin and ibuprofen, herbal, alternative and complimentary therapies
- are taking diclofenac

Patient Information

After starting methotrexate, tell your doctor if you:

- have any bleeding in your urine or stools
- have pain or difficulty breathing
- have a dry persistent cough or fever
- have an allergic reaction such as a rash or swelling of your lips or tongue
- have a sore throat or mouth ulcers
- develop yellowing of the skin or generalized itching
- develop severe vomiting, stomach pains or diarrhoea
- develop vaginal inflammation or ulcers
- find that you bruise more easily
- develop loss of appetite or weight loss

Vaccines

Pneumovax and annual flu vaccines are generally safe.

Do not be vaccinated with 'live' vaccines such as yellow fever, polio, measles, mumps, BCG and rubella while taking methotrexate.

If a live vaccine is needed and there is no alternative, your doctor will discuss the possible risks and benefits for you.

Fertility, pregnancy and plans to breastfeed

Methotrexate can reduce fertility and is likely to harm an unborn baby.

Both men and women taking methotrexate should take contraceptive precautions. After stopping methotrexate, continue taking contraceptive precautions for up to 6 months.

Do not breastfeed whilst taking methotrexate.

Chicken pox and shingles

If you're taking methotrexate and have never had chicken pox, you may be at risk of severe infection from the virus which causes chicken pox and shingles.

If you come into close contact with someone who has chicken pox or shingles, contact your doctor as soon as possible.

Other things to note

- Only take medicine that is prescribed for you, and never give it to anyone else.
- Methotrexate and alcohol can interact and damage your liver. If you do drink alcohol, only drink it in small amounts.
- Keep all medicines out of the reach of children.
- Do not take methotrexate if you are taking trimethoprim or co-trimoxazole (Septrin)

This leaflet does not contain all the uses and side effects associated with methotrexate. For more details, please see the drug information leaflet which comes with your medicine or speak to your pharmacist.

If you'd like more information, contact the MS specialist nurses on 024 7696 5128.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, please contact us on 024 7696 5128 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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Patient Information

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