



Living with Pulmonary Fibrosis: Immunosuppressant medication

Methotrexate

(Methoblastin, ARX-Methotrexate, Chexate)



Disclaimer

This resource provides some information about the immunosuppressant medication methotrexate. It does not contain all the available information and does not take the place of talking to your doctor or pharmacist. Always seek the guidance of your doctor or other qualified health professional for any questions you may have regarding medications, your health or medical conditions. Please refer to the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet linked below for a more detailed guide to side effects and safety precautions.

Why is this medication being recommended?

Methotrexate belongs to a group of medications known as immunosuppressants and is often used in various conditions that cause inflammation in body organs, including the lung. Methotrexate affects your body's immune system and reduces the amount of inflammation. If left untreated, lung inflammation may lead to fibrosis (scarring) in the lungs. By reducing inflammation, methotrexate may allow the lung to return to normal in some cases and may also prevent the formation of more lung fibrosis.

When starting methotrexate, your doctor will tell you how much to take and when to take it. Methotrexate is usually taken as a tablet **once a week** on the same day each week, and the dose may be increased over a few weeks to months, until you reach the right dose for you. Your doctor will guide you on the right dose needed and this might change over time. You will need to have regular blood tests, usually monthly to start, and then every three to four months. Methotrexate can also be given as an injection under your skin, although this is less common.

What special precautions should I follow?

Before taking methotrexate:

- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are allergic to methotrexate or any other medications, foods, preservatives or dyes.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are taking other prescription and non-prescription medications, vitamins, nutritional supplements, and herbal products. Your doctor may need to change the doses of your medications or monitor you carefully for side effects.
- Methotrexate should **never** be taken during pregnancy as it can cause birth defects or miscarriage. Tell your doctor if you are pregnant, plan to have a baby, or are breast-feeding.
- Tell your doctor if you currently have or have previously had an active, recurring, or long-term infection; kidney or liver disease; low iron or any blood disorders/conditions.
- Vaccinations are important. Methotrexate can affect the way vaccinations impact your body. It is preferable to have vaccinations before starting methotrexate. In addition, some vaccines are to be avoided. Your doctor will advise on what vaccinations you should have.
- Tell your doctor if you are planning to have surgery, including dental surgery.

While taking methotrexate:

- Avoid infection by staying away from people who have easily transmitted infections and washing or sanitising your hands often.
- You need to be treated quickly if you develop an active infection of any kind.
- Avoid pregnancy or planning a pregnancy. Use effective contraception during treatment and for at least three months after you stop treatment for men and at least six months after stopping treatment for women. If you become pregnant, tell your doctor immediately.
- Do not breastfeed while you are taking this medication.
- Drinking alcohol while taking methotrexate can increase the risk of damaging your liver. Consult your doctor for advice about how much alcohol is safe in your situation. Having one to two standard drinks once or twice a week is generally considered unlikely to cause a problem.
- Your doctor will ask you to take folic acid supplements to reduce the chance of getting gastrointestinal side effects or liver or nerve problems. These can either be taken in a smaller daily dose or a larger weekly dose, usually the day after you take your methotrexate medication. Your doctor will give you instructions.
- You should not be immunised with 'live vaccines' during treatment. Discuss vaccination schedules with your doctor and always check before receiving a vaccine.
- If you are having surgery, including dental surgery, tell the doctor or dentist that you are on methotrexate.
- Tell any other doctors, dentists and pharmacists who treat you that you are taking methotrexate and remind them of this if you are about to be started on any other new medication.
- Be sun smart - wear a long sleeve shirt, hat and SPF 50 sunscreen while in the sun to reduce the risk of skin reactions.
- Be careful driving or operating machinery until you know how methotrexate affects you.

What side effects can this medication cause?

Methotrexate will dampen the function of your immune system, which decreases your ability to fight infections. You need to be alert to signs of infection and see your doctor immediately if you are concerned:



Be alert for fevers (particularly above 38 degrees Celsius), chills, lethargy or other signs of infection

Methotrexate may cause other side effects. Tell your doctor if any of these symptoms are severe or do not go away:



Stomach problems such as bloating, diarrhoea or constipation or nausea and vomiting



Tiredness or generally feeling unwell



Muscle aches, pain or stiffness



Skin reactions including sunburn, skin rash, itching from sunlight, sunlamps or tanning beds.



Mild hair loss



If you also have psoriasis, there may be increased redness or a burning sensation of your skin lesions.



Methotrexate can also affect the liver, kidney or bone marrow. See **'What monitoring will I need?'** below to learn more about how to prevent this from causing you problems.

Some side effects can be serious. The following symptoms are uncommon, but if you experience any of these, contact your doctor immediately.



Yellowing of the skin or eyes



Headache, stiff neck and sensitivity to bright light



Severe stomach pain



Severe skin rash, itching, hives



Allergic type reactions such as swelling of the face, lips, mouth or throat



New difficulty with breathing or coughing



Black and tarry stools, red blood in stools, bloody vomit.

What monitoring will I need?

Your GP or lung specialist will order regular blood tests to monitor for side effects. These will include blood counts (white blood cells, red blood cells, platelets), kidney and liver tests. There may be additional tests ordered by your doctor depending on the results.

Your specialist will also review you to discuss any other side effects that you may be experiencing. They will also continue to monitor your lung function (breathing tests) over time to map out the progress of your lung condition. It's helpful to keep your own detailed record of your prescriptions and tests.

Notes on your methotrexate prescription

	Methotrexate weekly dose	Blood test (Yes/No/Date)	Side effects and other notes
Month 1			
Month 2			
Month 3			

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Silicosis Support Nurse and Social Worker
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs

We thank the individuals and teams who contributed to the content and expert review of this fact sheet, in particular, Dr. Alan Teoh, Respiratory and Sleep Physician.

External Links

- Methotrexate (Methoblastin) Consumer Medicine Information leaflet: tga.gov.au
- Methotrexate (ARX-Methotrexate) Consumer Medicine Information leaflet: tga.gov.au
- Methotrexate (Chexate) Consumer Medicine Information leaflet: tga.gov.au

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