Methotrexate in Crohn’s Disease

The information in this leaflet is intended for general guidance. If your doctor has given you different advice, please follow his/her instructions.

What is methotrexate for?
Methotrexate works in a similar way to steroids, by reducing inflammation and suppressing the immune system. If your body does not respond to prednisolone your doctor will prescribe a drug called azathioprine for you. Azathioprine does not suit 1 in 5 people because they have side effects and methotrexate is prescribed instead. Methotrexate has a “steroid sparing” effect which means that people can often reduce the dose of steroids they take. You may be prescribed both medicines for some time. Methotrexate is also used to treat other inflammatory conditions such as psoriasis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Are there any side effects?
1 in 20 people have to stop taking methotrexate because of side effects such as feeling sick, headache, diarrhoea, sore mouth, fever, unusual bruising and hair loss. Taking folic acid tablets on the days of the week when not taking methotrexate helps to prevent these.

Methotrexate can reduce production of blood cells which fight infection, this is usually reversible on stopping the drug or reducing the dose. You should report any symptoms which may be due to infection such as a sore throat or fever immediately.
Liver disease and lung disease may occur but are rare. You should tell your doctor if you develop any cough or difficulty breathing.
There is an increased risk of infection and a slight increased risk of lymphoma (a type of cancer involving the lymph glands).

How is methotrexate given?
It is given orally once a week (or sometimes by injection into the muscle). Deaths have occurred due to methotrexate being taken daily by mistake. It is essential that you only take it once a week.

How will I know it is working?
You are unlikely to notice any improvement for at least 6 weeks and the full benefit may take 3 months.

Can I get pregnant?
Pregnancy in either you or your partner should be avoided during treatment and for 6 months after stopping because it could seriously harm the baby. Breastfeeding should also be avoided.

How often do I need blood tests?
Tests are required every 2 weeks for the first 8 weeks, then every month for the next 4 months and every 3 months after that. The results are checked by your hospital consultant and you will be informed if there is a problem. It is your responsibility to attend for a blood test, no reminders will be sent. Some GPs are willing to take over the monitoring once everything is stable.
Are any other tests needed?
If blood tests show abnormal liver function tests, then a liver biopsy may be needed but this is very unusual. Chest X Ray and lung function tests are needed if symptoms of cough or breathlessness develop.

Can I drink alcohol?
Because of the risk of liver disease you should not drink more than 7 units/week whilst taking methotrexate (1 unit = a small glass of wine or half a pint of beer or one measure of spirit).

Can I take other medicines?
Some medicines such as the antibiotics cotrimoxazole and trimethoprim should be avoided. Please check with your doctor that other medicines are safe.

What about vaccines?
You should avoid immunisations which involve any of the live vaccines such as polio, rubella (German Measles) and yellow fever. Flu vaccines and pneumovax are safe and recommended although they may not be as effective.

Who needs to know I am taking methotrexate?
You should inform any doctor or dentist treating you. If you buy medicines from a chemist tell the pharmacist

How do I find out more?
The information in this leaflet is limited. Please read the Patient Information Leaflet that will be supplied with your medication. If you would like to know more, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact:

General Manager
Medicine Division
Calderdale Royal Hospital
Telephone (01422) 222058

www.cht.nhs.uk

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.