Rheumatology medication – Frequently Asked Questions

This leaflet answers some of the most commonly asked questions from patients taking medication for their rheumatology conditions.

Please note the rheumatology blood surveillance and advice service are for rheumatology patients only. It is not a medical emergency service and not a general blood enquiry service. The Rheumatology Advice answerphone is on from 09.00-17.00 (Monday-Friday)

Should I still take my rheumatology medicines if I feel otherwise well?

Yes. Our advice is that all patients should continue to take their rheumatology medicines as recommended by their Rheumatology Team. Although many of the rheumatology medicines may reduce the body's natural defence (immune system), stopping your rheumatology medicines may cause your condition to flare up, which may then need stronger medication to get the condition back under control. Always discuss with your specialist team before stopping treatment.

If I develop an infection, should I continue my rheumatology medication?

We recommend that you visit your GP, and stop your rheumatology medications temporarily (e.g. methotrexate or biologic therapy) while you have symptoms of an infection (i.e., new cough, shortness of breath, fever or UTI) or you are on antibiotic treatment. **You should restart your rheumatology medicines, when you feel well.** If you are taking steroids, you should continue these, as stopping steroids suddenly can make you very unwell.

Can I have vaccine for shingles?

YES, only the NON-LIVE version called SHINGRIX.

NO, NEVER the live version!!

Can I have the Covid-19 and Flu vaccine?

Yes, but please **withhold methotrexate and biologic medication for 1 weeks after vaccines** to improve your immune response to the vaccine.

Can I have an MMR vaccine?

- **No,** if you are on biologic therapy.
- If you are on methotrexate – It will depend on your weight. Please have your current weight in kilograms (kg) before contacting the advice line.

How do I get my a CT or MRI scan result?

Reports take about 4-6 weeks to return to us. The clinician will write to you 2-3 weeks after the result is back, if they are abnormal or something needs to be discussed. Please be aware that the Rheumatology Department can only comment on the scans they requested.

Can I use complementary or herbal remedies?

Complementary or herbal remedies may **counteract with your prescribed medication**. If you choose to use these remedies, please discuss this with your GP first to ensure they are appropriate for you.

For more information, please visit Versus Arthritis https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/managing-symptoms/diet/

What if I need more blood test forms?

Please leave a message on the advice line 0118 322 6574, clearly stating your name and hospital number and the reason for your call.

Where can I get my Rheumatology medication (DMARDs) from (for newly diagnosed patients)?

Your specialist will provide your first prescription in clinic. Repeat prescriptions will be issued by your GP, please **contact them directly.**

When do I start my biologic therapy?

Biologic treatment usually starts **6–8 weeks or more after your referral to the specialist nurse**. Before treatment can begin, we need to make sure that:

- all your screening blood tests and X-ray results are available;
- you are suitable for the treatment; and
- high-cost drug funding has been approved

Where can I have the QuantiFERON blood test?

The QuantiFERON blood test is used in rheumatology to screen for latent tuberculosis infection in patients before they start therapy. This test is particularly important as rheumatology medications can increase the risk of reactivating latent TB.

You can get the QuantiFERON test done at the Royal Berkshire Hospital or at Bracknell Health Space before midday Monday to Thursday, and at West Berkshire Community Hospital before midday Monday to Thursday. You can book an appointment online for a blood test at one of these locations by visiting: https://www.swiftqueue.co.uk/royal_berkshire.php

I have not heard from the biologic supplier about delivery and training for my injection. What should I do?

Please contact the supplier directly if you know their number. Otherwise, contact the advice line or CAT 9 on 0118 322 7969 or email rbb-tr.CAT9@nhs.net.

My biologic meds are finished, and the biologic homecare team hasn't received a prescription from the hospital, what should I do?

Please check that you have a recent blood test, **no longer than 3 months old** before contacting the team to check on the progress of your prescription.

I received a 'did not attend' letter for a blood test, I have now booked a blood test for next week. Do I need to do anything else?

If you have rebooked your blood test, we will see the result. There is no need to contact us. We will get in touch if your blood test result is abnormal.

If you haven't rebooked, please contact your GP to arrange one as soon as possible or book an appointment at Royal Berkshire Hospital, Bracknell Health Space or West Berkshire Community Hospital online: https://www.swiftqueue.co.uk/royal_berkshire.php

I have missed a call from the nurse, what should I do?

You **DO NOT** need to call us back; we will contact you again. However, please be aware that calls from the hospital may displayed as '**undisclosed**', **'withheld' or 'spam'.**

Family Planning

Planning a family: When should I stop my arthritis medication?

If you are planning a pregnancy, please discuss your medication with your Rheumatology Team before trying to conceive.

- **Methotrexate:** This should be stopped **at least one month before trying to conceive**.
- **Leflunomide:** This should be stopped and a **cholestyramine/activated charcoal washout treatment** may be required before trying to conceive. This is a medical procedure used to rapidly clear long-acting drugs from the body.
- **Hydroxychloroquine and sulfasalazine**, are generally considered safe for pregnancy.

Your Rheumatology Team will advise you on the safest way to manage your medication when planning a pregnancy. Please consult your GP before making any changes to your lifestyle, family planning and to your medication.

Medication effects/ side effects

How long before my new medication takes effect?

Most DMARDs take 8-12 weeks to be effective, particularly if they require a gradual dose increase. Some people notice an improvement earlier than this.

Why do I need to take folic acid after methotrexate each week?

Folic acid helps protect the healthy cells in your body and reduces some of the side effects of methotrexate. It can make you less likely to be sick (vomit) or to experience diarrhoea.

I feel sick after taking my methotrexate, should I stop taking it?

Feeling sick (nausea) is a common side-effect of methotrexate, especially when treatment starts. This normally gets better, but for some people it may continue.

This feeling may be helped by:

- taking the methotrexate with or after food
- taking the methotrexate just before bed; you may be able to sleep through the feeling of sickness
- making sure you take your folic acid
- switching to injectable methotrexate once a week
- taking an anti-sickness tablet, you can get this from your pharmacy
- It is important that you take your methotrexate regularly so do not stop the drug without discussing it with your doctor first.

For further information about the drugs used in rheumatology and possible side effects, please visit the medication leaflets site on the arthritis research UK website.

Can I change the day I take my methotrexate?

Yes, to a later date (two or three days at the most) but not earlier. Always leave 7 days between treatments.

How often do I need blood tests?

When starting a DMARD, biologic treatment or a new medication regimen, blood tests are usually required:

- Every 2 weeks for the first 6 weeks
- Monthly thereafter
- Every 3 months once your treatment is stable
- Please keep your blood tests up to date, as this is essential for the safe continuation of your prescription. Your medication may not be continued if the required blood monitoring is overdue.

What should I do if I develop a rash after starting a new rheumatology medication?

If you develop a new rash after starting a rheumatology medication, **do not take any further doses until you have sought medical advice**. Contact your GP promptly and inform your rheumatology team.

If you develop **difficulty breathing, facial or lip swelling, fever, or blistering skin**, seek urgent medical attention. **Call: 111** if appropriate.

What can I do about injection site reactions?

Redness, itching, pain or swelling can occur after an injection. These reactions usually develop within **1-2 days** and settle within **3-5 days**, particularly during the first few months of treatment.

- Apply a cold compress.
- Ask your pharmacist about antihistamine treatment if needed.
- Check that you are using the correct injection technique.
- Use a different injection site each time.

If the reaction **does not settle or becomes worse**, please contact us on **0118 322 6574**.

Flaring

What if my Rheumatoid/Inflammatory arthritis flares?

Sometimes, your arthritis may flare despite being on medication. The majority of these flares are short-lived and can be self-managed.

To manage an arthritis flare-up effectively, consider the following strategies:

- **Rest and gentle movement:** Allow your joints time to recover by reducing activities that make pain worse. Engage in low-impact activities such as stretching or walking to maintain joint flexibility without over exertion.
- **Heat and cold therapy**: Warm baths or heating pads to relax muscles and alleviate stiffness. Use cold packs to reduce inflammation and numb sharp pain.
- **Medication management:** Short course of NSAIDs like ibuprofen and ibuprofen gel can help reduce pain and inflammation. Continue taking prescribed medications as directed by your healthcare provider.
- **Stress reduction:** Practice relaxation techniques like deep breathing, Tai Chi or meditation to manage stress, which can trigger flares. arthritisnsw.org.au

The following website may be helpful: Managing flares in rheumatoid arthritis (RA) | Rheumatoid Arthritis Flare Up

If your symptoms continue for more than 2 weeks or you feel they are severe despite self-help, please initially contact your GP and then the advice line after a repeat blood test.

Can I have a steroid injection before my holiday or special occasion?

If your inflammatory disease is particularly active, we may consider giving you a steroid injection to settle your symptoms, especially if you are waiting for new treatments to start working. However, regular use of steroids is not recommended and can be harmful, so we do not routinely offer this before holidays or other special occasions.

Infection or surgery

Should I stop any of my medications before going into hospital for surgery?

Please continue your usual prescribed medications unless your surgical team tells you otherwise. Some rheumatology treatments may need to be paused before surgery and restarted afterwards. The timing will vary depending on your treatment and the operation you are having. Please make sure your surgeon knows which rheumatology medications your taking and discuss the plan with your Rheumatology Team before surgery.

Should I stop methotrexate if starting an antibiotic?

Stop methotrexate temporarily if you develop an infection requiring antibiotics. Restart it once you have recovered and completed the course of antibiotics.

Trimethoprim and co-trimoxazole (Septrin) should not be taken with methotrexate. Always tell the prescriber that you are taking methotrexate.

What should I do if I get chickenpox while on methotrexate or biologic medications?

You should stop taking Methotrexate and notify your GP as soon as possible as you may need treatment to minimise the severity of the disease.

How do I change or cancel an appointment?

If you need to **change or cancel a rheumatology outpatient appointment or telephone appointment,** please phone the Rheumatology Admin Team CAT 9 on 0118 322 7969.
Please ensure that you do cancel your appointment if you cannot attend so other patients can be contacted to take your appointment slot.

Can you complete my Personal Independence Payment (PIP) paperwork?

You should see your GP for assistance if you need help filling in your PIP application. A specialist report is not normally required.

Research

Can I take part in research or clinical trials?

We participate in many current studies related to various rheumatology conditions.
All research is optional, and not all studies involve drugs – most require a few minutes of your time and possibly a small blood sample.
If you are interested, do please contact us on tel: 0118 322 6694/6536 or
Email: rbb-tr.crossspeciality.researchteam@nhs.net

Alcohol and smoking

Can I drink alcohol while on rheumatology medications?

Some medicines used to treat your arthritis are processed by your liver, and when taken with alcohol, can increase the risk of liver side-effects. We recommend that you have no more than 14 units of alcohol a week.

Will smoking affect my condition?

Yes. Smoking can have a negative effect on rheumatoid arthritis and may make the condition more difficult to control. Rheumatoid arthritis and other inflammatory conditions can also increase your risk of cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disease. Smoking increases this risk further, so stopping smoking is an important step you can take to protect your overall health.
We strongly encourage you to stop smoking. Further information is available at Smoking and Rheumatoid Arthritis | NRAS | Smoking and RA

Where can I find more information about my condition, exercise and medication?

- www.nhs.uk and www.111.nhs.uk
- Royal Osteoporosis Society: 0808 800 0035 www.theros.org.uk
- National Ankylosing Spondylitis Society: 0208 741 1515 www.nass.co.uk
- National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society: 0800 298 7650 www.nras.org.uk
- British Society of Rheumatology: 0800 2987650 www.rheumatology.org.uk
- Lupus UK: 0170 873 1251 www.lupusuk.org.uk
- Arthritis Action: 0203 781 7120 www.arthritisaction.org.uk
- Versus Arthritis: 0300 790 0400 www.versusarthritis.org
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/arthritis/living-with

Contact us

Rheumatology Advice Service 0118 322 6574 (9-5 answerphone)
Clinical Admin Team (CAT 9): 0118 322 7969 rbb-tr.CAT9@NHS.net

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Rheumatology: November 2026
Next review due: November 2028