

METHOTREXATE

Why is this medication prescribed?

In dermatology, we most often use methotrexate (MTX) to treat severe psoriasis, though it can also be used for a number of other conditions.

How does it work?

Methotrexate works in a few ways. First, *it interrupts the production of rapidly-growing cells*. This can be helpful for conditions like psoriasis, in which the skin cells are produced much faster than normal, and in turn create a build-up of thick, scaling 'plaques'. *The second way methotrexate helps is by **slightly** limiting the strength of our immune system*. Patients with 'autoimmune' conditions experience many of their symptoms due to what is essentially an 'overreaction' of the immune system. By limiting this excessive reaction, the 'autoimmune' condition improves.

How should this medicine be used?

Many patients find it easiest to take their full dose of methotrexate once weekly. Alternatively, separating the doses can decrease the potential for stomach upset. Therefore, some prefer to take it in 3 divided doses, separated by 12 hours between each dose. Your doctor will explain these options in greater detail.

What special precautions should I follow?

There are a few medications you should avoid while on methotrexate. These include a 'sulfa' antibiotic called *trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole* (brand name *Bactrim*[®] or *Septra*[®]). Taking methotrexate at the same time can cause a serious interaction. Also, try to limit use of 'NSAID' pain-relievers such as aspirin and ibuprofen. Tylenol (acetaminophen) may occasionally be taken instead. Do not breastfeed while you are taking methotrexate. Women should not get pregnant, and men should avoid conceiving a child while using methotrexate. You should limit alcohol intake to a *maximum* of 1-2 drinks per week. Finally, be sure to let *every* doctor you see know that you're taking methotrexate. The reason is that they may need to avoid prescribing certain medications which could interact and cause harmful side effects.

What should I do if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. If it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule.

What side effects can this medication cause?

Like any medicine, methotrexate may cause side effects. Some of the more common side effects are dizziness, drowsiness, headache, swollen/tender gums, fatigue, decreased appetite, stomach upset/diarrhea, and hair loss. Internally, it can cause low blood count or liver problems (which is why we monitor labs). **If at any point you experience significant side effects, contact us or seek appropriate medical attention.**

What about labs?

It's important that you have requested labs performed as directed by your doctor. Methotrexate is a serious medication and often the first sign that someone is sensitive to this medicine is that their blood tests show changes. If abnormalities occur, we can often adjust or stop the medication before any harm is done.

STARTING METHOTREXATE

We may ask you to take a 'test dose' of methotrexate before starting your regular weekly regimen. If so, you will first have 'baseline' labs drawn. Once we receive these results, we will contact you and ask you to take an initial, relatively small dose. **You will need to repeat labs 48 hours after taking this initial 'test' dose.** We then review those results to ensure that you aren't showing signs of being 'overly-sensitive' to methotrexate. Provided all labs are fine, we will then gradually increase the dose every week for several weeks, again checking labs 48 hours after each weekly dose. Once we reach the full dose, lab work and follow-up examinations will become less frequent.