

Methotrexate - Medication Information

What is methotrexate?

Methotrexate is a medication that slows down the immune system's activity to heal inflammation. It is used to keep inflammatory bowel disease inactive and under control.

How is methotrexate given?

Methotrexate is given as an injection (shot) in the thigh or stomach area, or as a tablet (pill) taken by mouth. It is more effective when given as an injection. The typical dose of methotrexate can range from 10 mg to 25 mg once a week.

Sometimes it is used in combination with another medication to prevent your body from rejecting those medications. In this case, methotrexate may be used at a lower dose.

When can I expect methotrexate to work?

Methotrexate can take up to 3-6 months to start working.

Methotrexate is not effective in treating short term flare-ups of Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. In this case, it is often used in combination with other medications that take quicker to work such as corticosteroids (prednisone, budesonide).

Methotrexate works well for about half of patients with Crohn's disease. Studies have shown that methotrexate alone is not effective in most patients with ulcerative colitis.

What tests are needed while I am on methotrexate?

Methotrexate can cause blood count, kidney, and liver test abnormalities. For the first 3 months, your doctor will have you get blood tests done to monitor them every 2 weeks. After that, you will need to do blood tests to monitor them every 3-4 months while you are on the medication.

What are the potential side effects of methotrexate?

Nausea and diarrhea: The most common side effects with methotrexate are nausea and diarrhea. This usually goes away within 1-2 days. Taking the medication at night or taking an anti-nausea medication along with the methotrexate can help. Injected methotrexate causes less nausea than the oral tablets.

Folic acid deficiency: Methotrexate causes your body to not get enough of a vitamin called folic acid. For this reason, as long as you are on methotrexate, you need to take a prescription folic acid 1mg supplement every day. Your IBD provider will prescribe this to you.

Allergic reaction: Methotrexate can cause allergic reactions such as cough or difficulty breathing. If you notice this within a month of starting treatment, let your provider know.

Fibrosis: High doses of methotrexate, particularly when taken for a long time, may cause scarring in the liver called fibrosis. This is uncommon but should be monitored through blood tests every 3-4 months.

Infection: As with other medications that act on the immune system, methotrexate can increase your risk of infections. Serious infections are uncommon, but serious medical conditions like uncontrolled diabetes or lung disease may increase this risk.

Cancer: Methotrexate may increase the risk of cancer. This is rare, but you should have frequent checkups with providers as recommended in the section below on taking care of your health.

Please see the medication package insert for the full list of potential side effects.

Is methotrexate safe during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

Women should **NOT** use methotrexate if they are pregnant, think they might be pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breastfeeding. Methotrexate has been linked to birth defects. Women on methotrexate should use reliable birth control to prevent pregnancy. Women should stop methotrexate at least 3 months before trying to get pregnant.

Men on methotrexate has not been linked to birth defects in the baby. However, men should discuss with their provider whether this medication needs to be temporarily stopped before trying to get pregnant with their partner.

How can I take care of my health while on methotrexate?

It is important to be up to date with your health maintenance while on methotrexate. This includes being current on all the recommended vaccines such as the flu, COVID-19, pneumococcal, and shingles vaccines. You should not get any live virus vaccines while on treatment or for 3 months after stopping it.

It is also important to be up to date in your general cancer screening including mammograms and pap smears for women, and skin check-ups for both men and women.

Speak to your primary care doctor about whether you are up to date on all your vaccines and cancer screening.

What if I have questions about methotrexate?

Talk with your provider about any questions or concerns you may have about methotrexate.

This document has been reviewed for plain language by Blum Center staff.

