



Australian  
Rheumatology  
Association

# PATIENT INFORMATION ON HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE

(Brand name: Plaquenil)

This information sheet has been produced by the Australian Rheumatology Association to help you understand the medicine that has been prescribed for you. It includes important information about:

- How you should take your medicine;
- What are the possible side effects;
- What tests you must have to monitor your condition and to detect unwanted effects; and
- Other precautions you should take.

Please read it carefully and discuss with your doctor.

## What is hydroxychloroquine?

Hydroxychloroquine (brand name Plaquenil) is a medicine used to treat rheumatoid arthritis and other inflammatory conditions such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE/Lupus).

Hydroxychloroquine is also an antimalarial medicine used to prevent and treat malaria and other parasitic infections. It is not used routinely now for this purpose because of resistance by the parasites.

It is not clear how hydroxychloroquine works in inflammatory conditions; however it is thought to have an action on the immune system. In rheumatoid arthritis, this action helps to reduce inflammation and thus reduce pain and swelling. It also limits damage to the joints and helps to prevent disability in the long term.

Because hydroxychloroquine acts to reduce the damage to the joints, rather than just relieve the pain, it belongs to the group of medicines called **disease modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs)**.

For more information about rheumatoid arthritis or systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE/Lupus) see the Arthritis Australia website

[www.arthritisaustralia.com.au/index.php/arthritis-information/information-sheets.html](http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au/index.php/arthritis-information/information-sheets.html).

## What benefit can you expect from your treatment?

60% of people will find hydroxychloroquine effective in improving their condition.

Hydroxychloroquine does not work straight away. Improvement in symptoms of joint pain, swelling and stiffness will be gradual. It may take between 8 to 12 weeks. The full effect of treatment may take up to 26 weeks.

Other medicines may be given to improve your symptoms while waiting for hydroxychloroquine to work.

Provided it remains effective and there are no side serious side effects, you can continue to take hydroxychloroquine indefinitely.

If hydroxychloroquine treatment is stopped for more than a few weeks there is a risk that your condition may worsen. Continue with your treatment unless advised by your doctor or unless side effects develop.

## How is hydroxychloroquine taken?

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Hydroxychloroquine is taken by mouth in tablet form. The usual dose is one tablet (200mg) twice a day. Tablets can be taken altogether once a day.

The dose may be reduced to a maintenance dose after a few months once a response is achieved. Occasionally it may be taken every second day.

It is best taken with food as it has a slightly bitter taste.

Hydroxychloroquine may be used with other arthritis medicines including:

- other DMARDs such as methotrexate;
- steroid medicines such as prednisolone or cortisone injections into the joint;
- anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs) such as naproxen (Naprosyn) and ibuprofen (Brufen, Nurofen);
- simple pain medicines such as paracetamol.

## Are there any possible side effects?

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Below are possible side effects that you might experience with your treatment. Tell your doctor if you experience any side effects. If you do experience side effects, a reduction in dose may minimise these so that you can continue to take the medicine. Your doctor will advise on any dose changes that are necessary.

### Most common possible side effects:

- About 10% of patients experience stomach and bowel side effects such as *nausea (feeling sick), loss of appetite or diarrhoea*. As the tablets are slightly bitter, these problems can often be reduced by taking the tablets with food or milk, or they may just improve with time.

**Tell your doctor if you experience any possible side effects.**

### Less common or rare possible side effects:

- Less common side effects include *skin rashes* and increased *sensitivity to the sun*. It is a good idea to wear sunscreen and a hat when in the sun. Hydroxychloroquine may also worsen psoriasis rash.
- Very rarely hydroxychloroquine may cause *temporary blurring of vision* due to deposits in the front of the eye (cornea). This is fully reversible when the medicine is stopped. You should report to your doctor any visual disturbances, (blurred vision, mist or fog before the eyes or light sensitivity).
- More serious eye problems involving the retina (back of the eye) are extremely rare. These occur mainly in people taking a high dose for longer than 5 years, or in those who have liver or kidney problems. Your doctor will advise you about what eye testing is required.
- Very rare effects include thinning of the hair, ringing in the ears, bleaching of the skin and/or hair, and weakness of the leg muscles.

## What precautions are necessary?

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### *Eye testing:*

- When you start treatment with hydroxychloroquine, your doctor will discuss your vision and may ask you to have an eye test. This eye test may be repeated during your treatment to monitor effects on your eyesight.

### *Pregnancy and breastfeeding:*

- If you intend becoming pregnant, or conceive while taking hydroxychloroquine, or if you are breastfeeding, you should discuss this with your doctor.
- Hydroxychloroquine can be used in pregnancy if the mother's condition is serious and no other effective treatment is available.

