



Australian  
Rheumatology  
Association

# PATIENT INFORMATION ON LEFLUNOMIDE

(Brand names: Arabloc, Arava)

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 leflunomide?

Leflunomide (brand name Arava) is a medicine used to treat rheumatoid arthritis. It is also used occasionally to treat other diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE/lupus) or psoriatic arthritis.

Leflunomide is an immunosuppressive medicine, which means that it works by reducing the activity of 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 leflunomide 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 see the Arthritis Australia website**

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

## What benefit can you expect from your treatment?

Over 70% of people with rheumatoid arthritis experience improvement with leflunomide treatment. Some achieve remission, where the arthritis virtually disappears. As with many medicines used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, some people experience no benefit from leflunomide treatment.

Leflunomide does not work straight away. It usually takes 4 to 8 weeks for symptoms to start to improve.

The full effect may take up to 26 weeks. Other medicines may be given to improve your symptoms while waiting for the leflunomide to work.

If it is effective, treatment can be continued for months or even years.

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

## How is leflunomide taken?

Leflunomide is taken by mouth in tablet form.

There are three different strengths of leflunomide tablets: 10mg, 20mg and 100mg. The usual dose is 10mg to 20mg daily. Sometimes, a higher dose may be given to begin with, but side effects are more common with this approach.

The tablets should be swallowed whole, not chewed or broken. They can be taken with or without food.

Leflunomide may be used with other arthritis medicines including:

- other DMARDs such as methotrexate;
- biological DMARDs (a newer type of DMARD, which act on natural substances in the body that contribute to inflammation and joint damage);
- steroid medicines such as prednisolone or cortisone injections into the joint;
- anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs) such as naproxen (Naprosyn) or ibuprofen (Brufen, Nurofen); and/or
- simple pain medicines such as paracetamol.

## Are there any possible side effects?

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Below are 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:

- Up to 20% of people experience stomach and bowel side effects when taking leflunomide. These effects can include *excessive wind, bowel discomfort, loss of appetite, nausea* (feeling sick) and *diarrhoea*. They often lessen after a few weeks of treatment and can be reduced by drinking plenty of water.
- Up to 10% of people may have other common side effects such as *skin rash, reversible thinning of hair, increase in blood pressure* or *dizziness*. These side effects are not usually serious and may lessen with continued treatment.

### Less common or rare possible side effects:

There are some rare but potentially serious side effects with leflunomide.

- **Blood counts:** Leflunomide can cause a drop in the number of white blood cells, which are needed to fight infection. It can

also cause a drop in the number of platelets, which help to stop bleeding.

Regular blood tests aim to pick these problems up early when they occur.

However, if you develop a sore mouth, mouth ulcers, easy bruising, nosebleeds, bleeding gums, breathlessness, infection or fever tell your doctor straight away.

- **Infections:** There is an increased risk of developing some infections, especially herpes zoster (chicken pox and shingles). You should try to avoid contact with people who have these infections. If you have an infection or persistent fever, tell your doctor straight away.
- **Liver enzymes:** Leflunomide can cause liver tests to rise, which may be due to hepatitis (liver inflammation). This is more likely if leflunomide is being taken with methotrexate. It is usually mild and improves when the medicine is stopped or reduced.  
It does not cause symptoms unless severe so regular blood tests are important. If you develop symptoms such as yellow discolouration of the whites of your eyes or yellow skin tell your doctor straight away.
- There have been rare reports of *numbness (neuropathy)* in patients taking leflunomide.
- There have been rare reports of *lung inflammation* in patients taking leflunomide.

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

## What precautions are necessary?

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### **Blood tests:**

- As leflunomide may affect liver and blood cells, you **must** have regular blood tests during your treatment. This is very important as you may not get symptoms with some of these problems.
- Blood tests are particularly important during the first few months of treatment and when leflunomide is taken with methotrexate.

- As well as monitoring for side effects, blood tests help to monitor your condition to determine if the treatment is effective.
- You will need to have full blood counts and liver function tests every 2 to 4 weeks for the first few months of treatment and then every 1 to 3 months after that.
- Your general practitioner will be informed about the monitoring schedule. It is important to see your general practitioner if you have been asked to do so as they have an important role to play in monitoring your condition.

**Other medicines:**

- Leflunomide can interact with other medicines. You should tell your doctor (including your general practitioner, rheumatologist and others) about all medicines you are taking or plan to take. This includes over the counter or herbal/naturopathic medicines. You should also mention your treatment when you see other health professionals.
- In particular, leflunomide can interfere with phenytoin (for epilepsy), warfarin (a blood thinning medicine) and tolbutamide (for diabetes).
- Most vaccines can be given safely with leflunomide. Talk with your rheumatologist before receiving any vaccines.

**Alcohol:**

- Because leflunomide can affect your liver, you should avoid heavy alcohol use while taking it. It is not known precisely what level of drinking is safe when on leflunomide. However, there is general agreement that 1 to 2 standard drinks taken once or twice a week is unlikely to cause a problem. Drinking more than 4 standard drinks on one occasion, even if infrequently, is strongly discouraged.

**Pregnancy and breastfeeding:**

- Leflunomide should not be taken during pregnancy or during breastfeeding. If you are a woman of child bearing age you should use effective contraception while taking leflunomide.
- Because the medicine stays in the body for a long time, you should not conceive for 2 years after stopping treatment.
- It is also recommended that men do not take leflunomide when they are trying to conceive. If a couple wishes to conceive, in certain circumstances leflunomide can be 'washed out' from the body using other medication.

**All patients taking leflunomide should be seen regularly by a rheumatologist to optimise treatment and to minimise any potential side effects.**

**If you have any questions or concerns write them down and discuss them with your doctor.**

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**Your doctor's contact details:**

**REMEMBER – Keep all medicines out of reach of children**

The information in this sheet has been obtained from various sources and has been reviewed by the Australian Rheumatology Association. It is intended as an educational aid and does not cover all possible uses, actions, precautions, side effects, or interactions of the medicines mentioned. This information is not intended as medical advice for individual problems nor for making an individual assessment of the risks and benefits of taking a particular medicine. It can be reproduced in its entirety but cannot be altered without permission from the ARA.

The NHMRC publication: *How to present the evidence for consumers: preparation of consumer publications* (2000) was used as a guide in developing this publication.