

Hydroxychloroquine

(Information from the DEPARTMENT OF RHEUMATOLOGY, IMMUNOLOGY AND ALLERGY, Christchurch Hospital, Christchurch, New Zealand)

WHY AM I PRESCRIBED HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE?

Although the drug hydroxychloroquine (and its related drug "chloroquine") are used in the treatment of malaria, they have also been shown to be effective for several rheumatic conditions including rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). They lower disease activity and inflammation (and so reduce pain, swelling and stiffness of joints and improve the rash of SLE).

HOW DO I TAKE HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE?

You take the prescribed dose with or after food to reduce any stomach upset.

WHAT DOSE DO I TAKE?

Your doctor will advise you. Usually you start on a full dose (eg 400 mg or two tablets of hydroxychloroquine) and later your doctor may reduce it (eg to 200 mg or one tablet of hydroxychloroquine).

Anti-malarials are not pain-killers so if you are already on an anti-inflammatory drug or pain-killer then it is important to continue to take these as well, unless your doctor advises otherwise.

HOW LONG WILL HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE TAKE TO WORK?

Hydroxychloroquine does not work immediately. It may be 12 weeks before you notice any benefit and may even be as long as four months.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE-EFFECTS?

These are uncommon. However, a few patients develop skin rashes, indigestion, diarrhoea, headaches or blurred vision. Very rarely hydroxychloroquine may damage the retina (part of the eye).

MONITORING TESTS

Your doctor may arrange for eye checks, either at the beginning or soon after you commence hydroxychloroquine. Although many rheumatologists and ophthalmologists believe that eye monitoring is unnecessary, our current policy in Christchurch is to have an eye examination early on when you are prescribed hydroxychloroquine and then to repeat this five years later.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Pregnancy Hydroxychloroquine should be avoided during pregnancy as it may harm the unborn child. If you are planning a family or wish to breastfeed you should seek advice from your doctor.

- Alcohol There is no particular reason for you to avoid alcohol while taking hydroxychloroquine (in moderate quantities of course!).

If you have any questions or need advice about your treatment, do not hesitate to consult your doctor or pharmacist.

REMEMBER TO KEEP ALL MEDICINES OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN.