

Medicines and arthritis

This sheet provides general information about the main types of medicines used for arthritis. It also gives tips on the safe use of medicines and where to go for further information. This sheet does not cover the full range of possible side effects for each medicine and you should discuss this further with your doctor or pharmacist.

Analgesics (pain relievers)

Pain relievers are often the first medicine your doctor will recommend to help with pain.

Types: Paracetamol is a simple pain reliever that can ease mild to moderate pain. There are also stronger pain relievers, such as a combination of paracetamol and codeine, tramadol and a range of morphine-like medicines (opiates). Some pain relievers are available without a prescription, while others must be prescribed by a doctor.

Effects: Pain relievers act on the nervous system to reduce pain. They do not affect other symptoms such as joint swelling or stiffness.

How are they used: In some cases pain can be controlled by using an analgesic just when it is needed. Sometimes pain is better controlled by taking an analgesic regularly, for example four times a day. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice on the best way to take analgesics for your condition.

Risks: Paracetamol has very few side effects when taken at the recommended dose. However taking more than the recommended daily dose can potentially cause severe liver problems. Stronger pain relievers may cause constipation, nausea, vomiting and drowsiness.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) NSAIDs reduce inflammation, joint swelling and stiffness. They are often used to treat inflammatory forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis. They may also relieve pain that is not controlled by analgesics alone.

Types: There are many different types of NSAIDs available, such as naproxen, ibuprofen and COX-2 inhibitors. Even though some NSAIDs are available

without prescription, your doctor can advise which of the NSAIDs and dosage are best for you.

Effects: NSAIDs stop the body producing substances (prostaglandins) that cause inflammation. This reduces symptoms such as pain and swelling. NSAIDs do not cure or have a long-term effect on your arthritis.

How are they used: Some conditions can be effectively controlled by using NSAIDs occasionally, i.e. as needed. Other conditions may require more regular use of NSAIDs. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice on the best way to take NSAIDs for your condition and how to reduce the dose of NSAIDs if your pain is less.

Risks: Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking NSAIDs as they may cause serious side effects compared to paracetamol. If you have problems with your blood pressure, kidneys or heart then the risk of heart attack, stroke and kidney failure may be increased in a small number of people. One of the most serious side effects of NSAIDs is bleeding of the stomach and upper intestine. Signs of bleeding include stomach pain, blood in your stools (or dark stools) and coffee-coloured vomit. You should see your doctor if you have any of these signs while taking NSAIDs.

Corticosteroids

Corticosteroids are used to treat inflammatory forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis. They can also be used to treat a single inflamed joint.

Types: Corticosteroids can be taken by mouth as tablets or liquid. They can also be given by injection into a joint, muscle or soft tissue.

Effects: These medicines have a strong anti-inflammatory effect and reduce pain and swelling. However they do not cure the disease.

How are they used: Your doctor will prescribe the lowest possible dose for the shortest time, due to the risk of side effects. You may need to restart corticosteroids again during a 'flare' (when symptoms worsen for a period of time).

Risks: Corticosteroids can have serious side effects if taken in high doses or for a long time (more than a few weeks). Your doctor will monitor you for side effects while you are taking corticosteroids. Common side effects include weight gain, thinning of the bones (osteoporosis), high blood pressure and increased susceptibility to infection. Corticosteroid injections usually produce fewer side effects than tablets.

Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)

DMARDs are used to treat inflammatory forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis. Many DMARDs act on the immune system to cause 'immunosuppression'. This reduces the activity of the immune system which is attacking and damaging healthy joints. There is also a newer group of DMARDs

available, known as 'biological DMARDs'. These block certain substances in the blood and joints that cause inflammation. This reduces inflammation and halts joint damage. DMARDs and biological DMARDs are usually only prescribed by specialists.

Important medicine tips

- Understand why you are taking the medicine and what are the possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist for the Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) leaflet for your medicine. See the Australian Rheumatology Association's Patient Medicine Information or ask your rheumatologist for a copy.
- Always take your medicines as directed. If you have any questions check with your doctor or pharmacist.
- Keep a personal record of all your medicines with you, including doses and allergies. This can be useful when you are talking to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medicines, including natural medicines, as some medicines cause problems if taken together.
- Do not share your medicines with friends or relatives – the medicines you are taking may be harmful to them.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the right medicine for you.
Learn about your medicines, how to take them and possible side effects.

For more information:

The Australian Rheumatology Association has information sheets on NSAIDs, corticosteroids and each of the DMARDs and biological DMARDs. The sheets cover detailed information about how to take the medicine, side effects and precautions. These are available online at: www.rheumatology.org.au

Call the Medicines Line for independent information about prescription, over-the-counter and natural medicines. Provided by the National Prescribing Service. Phone: 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST. Web: www.nps.org.au

Books Klippel, John (editor) 2006, *The essential guide to arthritis medications: Prescription and over the counter treatments for your joint pain from A to Z*, Arthritis Foundation USA, Atlanta, GA.

Source: A full list of the references used to compile this sheet is available from your local Arthritis Office

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Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis
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