

# INFORMATION

information



VICTORIA

inc. OSTEOPOROSIS VICTORIA

## ARTHRITIS AND MEDICATIONS

There are many things people can do to help manage arthritis. This includes participating in a suitable program of physical activity, learning to manage pain and negative emotions and finding new ways to accomplish difficult tasks.

Medications can help to control symptoms such as pain, swelling and stiffness and some can slow the progress of the disease. Maintaining good communication about medications with your doctor is also important in order to optimise your medical management.

Different types of arthritis are treated with different medications. For example, gout and septic arthritis (arthritis due to joint infection) are treated with specific medications.

The different medications used to treat arthritis can be divided into four groups, each group having a different action. Often a combination of medications is prescribed.

### 1. Pain relieving medications

These medications have differing strengths. Some, such as paracetamol, can be bought without prescription and are used for the treatment of mild to moderate pain in osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.

### 2. Aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication (NSAIDs)

These medications can reduce pain and joint inflammation eg ibuprofen and naproxen. They may cause side effects (unwanted effects) affecting the stomach and other parts of the gastrointestinal tract. Talk to your doctor if you are concerned about side effects.

### Cox-2 Inhibitors

These newer anti-inflammatory medications work similarly to NSAIDS, but have fewer side effects, eg celecoxib and rofecoxib

### 3. Corticosteroids

These medications are very effective in reducing inflammation (pain, swelling, heat and redness). These may be taken by mouth and given periodically by injection into the joint. Eg prednisolone. However, taken long term they can cause side effects including osteoporosis.

### 4. Disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs)

These medications are mainly used to treat rheumatoid arthritis but also in some other rheumatic diseases. They reduce pain, swelling and stiffness and importantly, slow the progress of the disease and reduce joint damage.

The full effect of these medications can take between 3 to 12 weeks so changes in symptoms may not be apparent during this time. Regular blood tests are required in order to monitor any side effects. An alternative DMARD may be prescribed if side effects develop. Eg. methotrexate, sulphasalazine, D-penicillamine, azathioprine, gold, cyclophosphamide, cyclosporin, anti-malarial drugs, leflunomide.

### 5. Biologic response modifiers

This new group of medications called the anti-TNF drugs, block the action of a chemical called tumour-necrosis factor (TNF). TNF has a role in the inflammation and tissue damage of rheumatoid arthritis.

These medications are only prescribed for people who have not responded well to the other DMARDs. Eg entanercept and infliximab

#### Four important points about arthritis medications

- Some medications do not work immediately.
- More than one medication may be prescribed. Medications work in different ways.
- If one medication does not work this does not mean that you will not respond to another. If you develop side effects with one medication this does not mean you will with another.
- Some medications are started at low dose and gradually increased. Others are started at high dose and may be reduced depending on how you respond to the drug.

#### General points about taking medications

- Keep a list of all medications. Include any drug allergies.
- Gain an understanding about your medications. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- Find out how they should be taken and how often.
- Ask about any possible side effects and discuss the “pros and cons” for taking this medication.
- Talk to your doctor before taking complementary or alternative treatments. This will help to avoid any interactions between your medications and these treatments.

#### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

“Medicines Line” - This is a national information service providing independent, accurate information about medicines including prescription, over the counter and complementary medicines. Phone 1300 888 763

#### Resource Centre

All listed books and videos are available on loan from the Arthritis Victoria Resource Centre to members. If you would like to find out more about becoming a member call: (03) 8531 8000.

- *A-Z guide to drug herb interaction: How to improve your health and avoid problems when using common medications and natural supplements together* (1999), Prima Health, Roseville, CA.
- *Arthritis drugs and more: An A to Z guide: The ultimate guide to prescription and over the counter treatments for arthritis, fibromyalgia and more* (2004), Arthritis Foundation of America, Atlanta, GA.
- Stone, Trevor; Darlington, Gail (2000), *Pills, potions, poisons: How drugs work*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

#### Websites

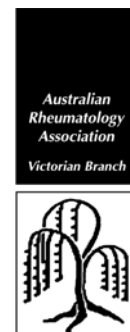
Better Health Channel ~  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/)  
Reliable health information and services—quality assured by the Victorian (Australian) Government.

MedlinePlus ~ [www.medlineplus.gov/](http://www.medlineplus.gov/)  
A service of the US National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health.

#### ARTHRITIS VICTORIA

If you would like further information  
please contact our  
Telephone information service on

**(03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041 (country callers)**



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Prepared by Education & Services staff, Arthritis Victoria, March 2004. This material is for your information and is not intended to be medical advice. You are encouraged to review the information provided with your doctor or relevant health professional.