

# Rheumatoid Arthritis

## Why are Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drugs Important?

Disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (DMARDs) is the name given to a group of medicines. They are usually prescribed soon after you are diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) to reduce damage to your joints. They also relieve the symptoms of RA such as pain and inflammation (swelling).

### What is rheumatoid arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease (your body's defense system attacks its own joints by mistake) which causes the joints of both sides of the body to become swollen and painful. Over time, if left untreated, this inflammation (swelling) may destroy the cartilage and bone in the joint. This can limit your daily activities and make it hard for you to walk or use your hands.

### Common DMARDs include:

- methotrexate (Trexall®)
- leflunomide (Arava®)
- hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil®)
- sulfasalazine (Azulfidine®)
- abatacept (Orencia®)
- adalimumab (Humira®)
- etanercept (Enbrel®)



### How quickly do DMARDs start working?

It can take several weeks or months for DMARDs to ease the pain and inflammation caused by RA. Anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen or naproxen and steroids such as prednisone may be taken for a brief period of time to control the symptoms until DMARDs start working.

### How long will I be on a DMARD?

To reduce the damaging effects of the disease on the joints you may be on these medicines for the rest of your life. You may also need to take more than one type of DMARD.

### What if I get a side effect from a DMARD?

There are several types of DMARD medicines. Side effects are different for each type of DMARD and you should review all side effects with your doctor or pharmacist. Your health care provider will monitor your blood to check for side effects that may affect your blood, liver or kidneys.

It is important to continue to take a DMARD to help prevent joint damage and help to slow down the progression of the disease. If one DMARD does not work for you or makes you feel sick, your health care provider may have you try a different one.



#### For more information:

- Call a Harvard Pilgrim nurse for education or support at 866-750-2068 (TTY service: 711), Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Visit [www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org) or [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org) for more information on RA and for tools to help you manage your disease.

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