



Managing Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

Managing RA is an ongoing process. Even though there is no cure for RA, there are treatments that can relieve pain and improve symptoms. Following are some common medication side effects you may experience during RA treatment. However, your symptoms may vary from this list.



Injection Site Reaction

If you inject your medication, you may experience a mild injection site reaction. This can be mild swelling, redness, itching and/or pain at the injection site for a day or two after the injection. If you are experiencing a severe reaction or have any signs of infection, contact your doctor right away.

- ▶ If your nurse or pharmacist says it's okay, allow your medication to warm to room temperature before injecting. Don't use a heat source like warm water or a microwave to warm the medication. Simply take it out of the refrigerator about 20-30 minutes before injecting. Don't return the medication to the refrigerator once it has warmed to room temperature.
- ▶ After cleaning the site with alcohol wipes, let the skin dry first. Do not blow on the skin to dry the alcohol.
- ▶ Rotate injection sites. Move each injection several inches away from the previous injection site. Try writing down where injections are given instead of relying on your memory.
- ▶ If you have pain when injecting, apply ice to the injection site for 30-60 seconds before cleaning the site and injecting the medication.
- ▶ Avoid injection sites that are tender, reddened, scarred or bruised.
- ▶ Talk to your doctor if the injection site reaction lasts more than 24-48 hours or if you have signs of infection

Increased Risk of Infection

Your RA medication may make you more at risk for infections. In particular, sinus or upper respiratory infections. Because of your elevated risk, it's important you take steps to protect your immune system. If you think you have an infection, tell your healthcare provider right away. They may recommend holding a dose or more of medication. Always check with your doctor before receiving live vaccines, including flu shots. Symptoms of infection include but aren't limited to:

- Fever
 - Chills or sweats
 - Sore throat
 - Trouble breathing
 - Stuffy nose, cough or other cold symptoms
 - Redness, soreness or swelling in any area
 - Upset stomach
 - New onset of pain
 - Sores that will not heal
- ▶ Use hand sanitizer and be sure to also wash your hands often with warm water and soap.
 - ▶ Avoid contact with people who are sick.
 - ▶ Wash foods thoroughly before eating.
 - ▶ If you inject your medication, make sure the site is properly cleaned.

Nausea, Vomiting and Dehydration

Your RA medication may make you feel nauseous. Described as feeling sick to the stomach, nausea can range from mild discomfort to the urge to vomit. Vomiting can also lead to dehydration. Be sure to drink enough water each day. It's key to find out what makes you nauseous and take steps to control it.

- ▶ Drink and eat slowly.
- ▶ Drink plenty of fluids.
- ▶ Drink peppermint, chamomile or ginger tea.
- ▶ Eat foods at room temperature.
- ▶ Avoid foods or food odors that may make you nauseous.
- ▶ Avoid greasy, fried or spicy foods.
- ▶ Try to get plenty of rest.
- ▶ Add a slice of lemon, lime, mint or cucumber to your water for flavor.
- ▶ Instead of eating three big meals, eat small meals throughout the day.

Headache

Some RA medications may cause headaches.

- ▶ Take medication at bedtime to sleep through discomfort.
- ▶ Ask your healthcare provider if you are able to take pain relievers and which ones are best for you.
- ▶ Drink plenty of water.
- ▶ Don't drink caffeine.
- ▶ Keep the lights dim, avoid loud noises, and strong smells. Rest and try to relax until the headache goes away.
- ▶ Seek medical attention if these tips don't relieve your headache or if the headache is severe.

Appetite Loss

Your RA medication may make you not want to eat. You may eat less than usual or not feel hungry. You may feel full after eating only a little and food may taste bland. If you're not getting proper nutrition, consider talking to a dietitian.

- ▶ Eat small meals five to six times a day, rather than three large ones, and keep snacks within reach.
- ▶ If your food seems bland, try adding more seasonings to your food.
- ▶ Meet with a dietitian. Dietitians can help guide you in meeting your nutritional needs. Amber Specialty Pharmacy offers nutritional support and guidance to patients and can be referred to our Registered Dietitian for assistance.
- ▶ Speak with a therapist or counselor if your loss of appetite is from stress and anxiety.
- ▶ Avoid unpleasant odors and food smells.

Diarrhea

Some RA medications may cause diarrhea. Diarrhea is frequent, loose or watery bowel movements and ranges from mild to severe. Diarrhea many times a day can make you weak and dehydrated. Don't be embarrassed to share concerns with your healthcare provider. Let them know if you have had diarrhea for over 24 hours.

- ▶ Drink plenty of fluids without caffeine, for example water and sports drinks.
- ▶ Eat small meals of soft, bland, low fiber foods - bananas, white bread, rice, applesauce, noodles or chicken.
- ▶ Avoid spicy, fatty, dairy or high sugar foods.
- ▶ Avoid high fiber foods - beans, whole grain breads and cereals, nuts, raw vegetables or fruits.

FAQs

What is RA?

RA is a type of arthritis that occurs in joints on both sides your body. It is a chronic autoimmune inflammatory disease, which means the body's immune system attacks healthy tissues. With RA, the thin membrane that surrounds your joints is attacked, leading to pain and inflammation throughout your body.

What causes RA?

It's believed that RA may be caused by a combination of your genes and environmental factors such as cigarette smoking .

What are the symptoms of RA?

Symptoms and joint damage usually happen on both left and right sides of your body. Common symptoms include:

- Decreased movement or range of motion
- Inflammation or swelling
- Joint pain
- No appetite
- Low-grade fever

Medications that Treat RA

There is no cure for RA and most people with Rheumatoid Arthritis take some form of medication. There are typically four categories for RA Medications:

NSAIDs – Non-Steroidal Anti –Inflammatory Drugs

- These medications reduce pain. They do not reduce joint damage by themselves and are often prescribed with other medications. Commonly used NSAIDS are Advil, Aleve, Mobic and Celebrex.

DMARDS- Disease –Modifying Anti-Rheumatic Drugs

- These medications slow the disease process by modifying the immune system. DMARDs are used both alone and with other medications. Generic names for commonly used DMARDS include Hydroxychloroquine, Methotrexate, Sulfasalazine, Azathioprine and Leflunomide. More recently approved medications in this class include Xeljanz and Olumiant.

BIOLOGICS

- Biologic drugs are made from living organisms. Types of biologic drugs include vaccines, blood, cells, genes, tissues and proteins. Examples of biologic drugs include Cimzia, Enbrel, Humira, Kineret, Simponi, and Remicade. These drugs work by targeting that part of your immune system that is not working and leads to joint pain.

CORTICOSTEROIDS

- These medications help reduce pain and swelling by decreasing the body's immune response. Keep in mind that this effect may make you more susceptible to infection. Corticosteroids may also affect blood pressure and blood glucose levels and should be closely monitored.

Other types of treatment for RA include physical therapy, occupational therapy, surgery or lifestyle changes.

What are the side effects of these medications?

Common side effects include but aren't limited to:

- Low white blood cell count
- Increased risk of infection
- Injection site reaction
- Fatigue
- No appetite
- Nausea or vomiting
- Headache
- Diarrhea
- Sinus infection
- Upper respiratory infections

How do I manage side effects?

Medication can affect each patient differently. Amber Specialty Pharmacy works with patients to help manage any side effects that occur. Discuss any side effects that you experience with your pharmacist or doctor early.

What happens if I don't treat my RA?

If left untreated RA can progress and affect your ability to handle daily tasks and activities. Patients with RA are also at an increased risk of heart disease. It's important to take your medication as prescribed by your doctor to help avoid these issues.

Should I get my vaccines if I have RA?

It is important to stay up-to-date on your recommended vaccines. Certain medications used to treat RA can weaken your immune system and increase your risk of infection. Contact your healthcare provider for information about your vaccines and your current medications.

.....

RA can begin at any age, but it is most common among adults in their sixties. It affects women three times more than men.

.....



Amber Specialty Pharmacy is here to help.

We offer guidance and support through our dedicated team of healthcare experts. From the beginning, we help you with the enrollment process and review your insurance coverage. We explore financial assistance opportunities to help you lower your medication costs whenever possible. Our pharmacists review your prescriptions with you - including how to take your medication and manage any side effects. Pharmacists are available 24/7 to assist you when you have questions. Our Registered Nurse and Registered Dietitian offer personalized consultations to assist you with any medically-based questions and nutritional care. We stay in touch with you regularly to remind you when it is time to refill your prescriptions. We are always here to help.

Additional Resources:

Arthritis Foundation - arthritis.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - cdc.gov/arthritis/basics/rheumatoid.htm

Living Better with Arthritis - aidsforarthritis.com

American College of Rheumatology - rheumatology.org

Arthritis National Research Foundation - curearthritis.org

Mayo Clinic - mayoclinic.org

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases - niams.nih.gov

National Institutes of Health - ghr.nlm.nih.gov/condition/rheumatoid-arthritis

This information is intended for educational purposes only. The material is not a substitute for professional help or medical diagnosis. It is important that you consult a medical professional if this information leads you to believe there is a concern for you or your patient(s). The diagnosis and treatment of all physical and/or psychological disorders requires a trained professional.