



Visit your doctor to talk about your health and the medicines you may need. This factsheet will give you information about a type of medicine. You will learn what questions you should ask your doctor about this medicine. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It is very important for your health.

## Medicines to Treat Rheumatoid Arthritis

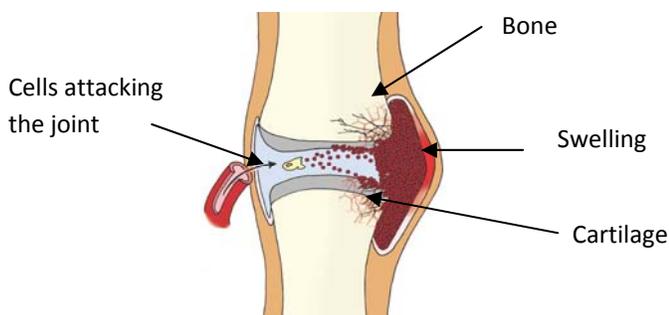
Rheumatoid arthritis is one of the most common types of arthritis in the U.S. It usually affects people between the ages of 30 and 55, but it can happen at any age. Rheumatoid arthritis affects women more than men.

In a healthy body, the **immune system** attacks and eliminates bacteria and viruses so people won't get sick. When a person has rheumatoid arthritis the immune system does not work well and this is what happens:

- By mistake, certain blood cells attack the tissue inside the joints
- The bones, the cartilage and other joint tissues start to get damaged
- This causes swelling, stiffness, and pain in the joints

Rheumatoid arthritis can destroy the joints of your body and cause disability. It can affect a person's quality of life.

Knee Joint



### Is rheumatoid arthritis the same thing as osteoarthritis?

No. Osteoarthritis happens when the bones in a joint begin to rub each other. This happens because the cartilage that protects the ends of the bones wears down. The medicines mentioned in this factsheet do not treat osteoarthritis.



## What medicines do doctors use to treat rheumatoid arthritis?

When a person is first diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, the doctor may first use a type of medicine called a **nonbiologic DMARD (Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drug)**. These medicines are less expensive and safer than other medicines and can help the person feel better.

Nonbiologic DMARDs come as brand-name medicines and as generic medicines. Some of these medicines are *hydroxychloroquine* (brand-name *Plaquenil*), *sulfasalazine* (brand-name *Azulfidine*), *minocycline* (brand-name *Dynacin* or *Minocin*), and *methotrexate* (brand-name *Rheumatrex*).



In the United States "generic" medicines are just as good as brand-name medicines. They are very safe and work just like the brand-name medicine, and they cost a lot less money. Ask your doctor if you can get a generic medicine instead of a brand-name medicine.

The doctor may also recommend taking other pain relievers, such as *ibuprofen* (brand-name *Advil*, *Motrin*) or *naproxen* (brand-name *Aleve*, *Naprosyn*) or other medicines called steroids, like *prednisone* and *methylprednisolone*. Doctors may also recommend a special exercise program. Exercise helps people with rheumatoid arthritis to keep their joints moving.



## What if these medicines are not enough?

If these treatments do not work and do not relieve the swelling, stiffness and pain, then the doctor may suggest using a different type of medicine, called a **biologic DMARD (Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drug)**. Biologic DMARDs help stop or reduce the inflammation and may help prevent further damage to the joint, but they **DO NOT** cure rheumatoid arthritis.

Biologic DMARDs work by blocking some functions of your immune system. This way the medicine can slow down or stop your immune system from continuing to attack your joints. Most of these medicines are given by injection. Some of them are put into a vein in your arm or under the skin like insulin injections for diabetics. You should discuss this with your doctor and let him or her know what kind of injection you feel more comfortable with.



## Do biologic DMARDs have side effects?

Yes, biologic DMARDs can have side effects.

| Mild side effects are:  | Serious side effects are:   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• diarrhea</li> <li>• headache</li> <li>• nausea</li> <li>• rash, itching, and pain on the area you inject the medicine</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allergic reactions</li> <li>• damage to the liver</li> <li>• skin cancer</li> <li>• infections, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, or staph</li> </ul> |

Do not take more than one biologic DMARD at the same time. This increases the chances of getting serious side effects. Let your doctor know if you have any of the following health problems before taking a biologic DMARD:

- heart failure
- diabetes
- tuberculosis
- hepatitis
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- any type of infection

If you take a biologic DMARD when you have any of these conditions, your chances of having side effects may go up. If you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant, do not take biologic DMARDs. This type of medicine may affect your baby.



## Which biologic DMARD should you choose?

*Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* evaluated different types of biologic DMARDs by comparing how well they work, how safe they are, their side effects, and their cost. *Consumer Reports* recommends these three biologic DMARDs as the best for most people:

| Generic Name        |   | Brand Name     |
|---------------------|---|----------------|
| • <b>Abatacept</b>  | ⇒ | <b>Orencia</b> |
| • <b>Adalimumab</b> | ⇒ | <b>Humira</b>  |
| • <b>Etanercept</b> | ⇒ | <b>Enbrel</b>  |

These three medicines are recommended because they work as well as other biologic DMARDs and people keep taking them for a longer time because the side effects are not as bad.

**To learn more about this topic go to:**

[http://www.consumerreports.org/health/best-buy-drugs/rheumatoid\\_arthritis.htm](http://www.consumerreports.org/health/best-buy-drugs/rheumatoid_arthritis.htm)



### How to Get the Best Price for Your Medicines

- **Ask for a generic:** Tell your pharmacist you want a generic medicine instead of the brand-name. You will pay less for a generic. Not all brand-name medicines have a generic, but many do.
- **Compare prices:** Call or visit three different pharmacies. Give them the name of the medicine and ask how much it costs. Ask if they have a drug discount program that can help you pay less for your medicine. Buy your medicine from the pharmacy that gives you the cheapest price.
- **Sign up for patient assistance programs:** Most companies that make medicines have programs that help people that don't have a lot of money and do not have insurance to get brand-name medicines for free or at a low cost. The Partnership for Prescription Assistance can help you find a program: [www.pparx.org](http://www.pparx.org) or 1-888-477-2669.

This series is produced by Consumer Reports and *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*, a public information project made possible by a grant from the States Attorney General Consumer and Prescriber Education Grant Program which is funded by the multi-state settlement of consumer fraud claims regarding the marketing of the prescription drug Neurontin. This brief should not be viewed as a substitute for a consultation with a medical or health professional. It is provided to enhance communication with your doctor, not replace it.