

# Leflunomide

## Rheumatology Department Patient Information Leaflet

Please keep this information in a safe place

### Introduction

This leaflet provides information about leflunomide which will be discussed with you by your rheumatology team.

Leflunomide is a powerful medicine and most people who have it are greatly helped and suffer few, if any, problems. However, it is a powerful medicine so this leaflet tells you more about the drug and how the risks or problems can be kept to a minimum.

### What is leflunomide?

It is a drug used to treat rheumatoid arthritis and psoriatic arthritis. It works by dampening down inflammation. It is usually prescribed to people who have had side effects or have not benefited from other treatments. Leflunomide helps to slow down the progression of the arthritis.

### What does leflunomide do?

Leflunomide acts by slowing the production of new cells by the body's immune system. This helps to reduce the inflammation that causes swelling and stiffness of joints that you experience with your condition. This reduces the permanent damage to joints caused by continuing inflammation. It is not a painkiller.

## How long will it take for leflunomide to work?

Leflunomide usually takes about four to six weeks to work. During this time you should notice less swelling, pain and stiffness of your joints. There may be further improvement for a further four to six months after starting the treatment.

## What happens before I start treatment?

Before you start your treatment you will need some blood tests to check your blood count, liver and kidneys. We will also check that your blood pressure is normal and weigh you.

This information will provide a record of how you are before you start treatment and to check whether leflunomide is a suitable treatment for you. A very small number of people will be unable to take leflunomide because of liver problems and we recommend that any high blood pressure is treated before starting it.

You will be asked about any other medicines, herbal, complementary or alternative therapies you are taking as these can interact with the leflunomide.

Effective contraception must be used by both men and women receiving leflunomide. You must not take leflunomide if you might be pregnant or wish to start a family.

## How should I take leflunomide?

The dose of leflunomide prescribed is either 10mg or 20mg once a day (your consultant will advise you about the dose). You can take leflunomide at any time of day but it is best to keep to the same time each day. Leflunomide can be taken with or without food.

You will be given your first prescription from the hospital and that will last for four weeks. Further prescriptions should be obtained from your GP (if you have any problems obtaining repeat prescriptions, contact the Rheumatology Department via the helpline).

## How should I store leflunomide?

You must keep leflunomide out of the reach of children and pets and handle it as little as possible. Tablets should be stored at room temperature.

## Will I have any side effects?

Most patients have no side effects. However, for those who do experience them, the most common are diarrhoea, nausea (feeling sick), abdominal (stomach) pain, loss of appetite and weight loss. Leflunomide sometimes causes rashes, slight hair loss, a mild increase in blood pressure, headaches and mouth ulcers.

Less common but more serious side effects include weakness, difficulty breathing and a drop in blood pressure.

## What problems must I look out for?

If you experience any of the side effects mentioned below, ask for advice from the rheumatology helpline or your pharmacist.

### Feeling sick, upset stomach or diarrhoea

When you first start treatment you may feel unwell. This normally settles but if it persists, speak to your consultant as they can give you medication to help with this.

If you vomit within a few hours of taking leflunomide, **do not take another dose** until you have contacted your consultant or the rheumatology helpline for advice.

### Mouth ulcers, sore throat or sore mouth

If you experience mouth ulcers, a sore throat or mouth, speak to your consultant or pharmacist. It may be necessary for you to have an extra blood test to check how your body is coping with the medication. In many cases, if your blood tests are normal, you may be given some medication to treat these problems.

### New rashes anywhere on your body

If you get a new rash, seek advice from your consultant or pharmacist.

### Thinning of the hair

This can happen but if it does happen it is usually slight. Hair growth usually returns to normal when you stop the treatment. If you feel that this is becoming more than a very slight hair loss, you should discuss it with your consultant.

**If you have any of the following side effects or problems, you need to stop treatment immediately and get urgent medical advice.**

### **Shortness of breath (breathlessness)**

Leflunomide can very occasionally cause inflammation of the lungs. The breathlessness caused by leflunomide can come on gradually over a few days. You may also have a dry cough. If you feel breathless when resting and you do not have a heavy cold (runny nose and temperature), you should stop the leflunomide and seek urgent medical advice.

You will also need to contact your consultant. It is important that they examine you as very occasionally leflunomide can cause severe inflammation of the lungs.

### **If the whites of your eyes become yellow or you develop severe itching of the skin**

**Stop the leflunomide** and seek advice from your consultant as these are sometimes signs of liver problems.

### **Infections, including fever, chills or severe sore throats**

Leflunomide may reduce your ability to fight infections and this can be a problem in some individuals who may be more vulnerable to infections. Your blood tests will help to monitor this. The specialist monitoring your treatment will contact you if there are any problems with your blood test results. Occasionally changes in your blood may mean you have to stop leflunomide treatment.

It is also important that you are careful about the risks of infections and take sensible precautions to avoid them. If you have any type of infection, **stop the leflunomide** and get prompt advice from your consultant.

### **New, unexplained bleeding or bruising**

This can sometimes mean that your blood cells are affected by the leflunomide. **Stop your leflunomide** and seek advice from your consultant.

If you experience any other problems or side effects, please report them to your consultant.

## Do I need any special tests while taking leflunomide?

Yes because in a few patients leflunomide can lower certain blood cells or affect the liver, so regular blood tests are needed to check for this.

You will need a blood test before you start the leflunomide and then every month for the first six months of treatment. If there are no problems after that, you will need blood tests every two months.

**It is your responsibility to have the blood tests. In order for us to receive the results from your blood tests, you will have to have them at any of the following centres:**

### **Russells Hall Hospital:**

Monday	8am to 7.30pm
Tuesday	5pm to 7.30pm
Wednesday	8am to 7.30pm
Thursday	12noon to 7.30pm
Friday	12noon to 7.30pm
Saturday	8am to 10am

No appointments required.

**Corbett Outpatient Centre:** Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm. No appointments required.

**Netherton Health Centre:** Appointment required, ring 01384 366500.

**Cross Street Health Centre:** Appointment required, ring 01384 366257.

**Ladies Walk Clinic:** Appointment required, ring 01902 575103.

Your blood pressure will be checked in clinic before you start the leflunomide and then once a month for the first six months. You will need to have it checked once every two months from then on. This can usually be arranged at your GP's surgery.

## Can I take other medicines with leflunomide?

Leflunomide is not a painkiller so you can continue with your usual painkillers, if needed. Anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can also be continued, if needed.

Some drugs interact with leflunomide, such as cholestyramine (sometimes used to treat high cholesterol). This can also occur with warfarin. Therefore, if you take warfarin, you will need to inform your anticoagulation clinic that you have started (or stopped) leflunomide as you may need to have more regular checks of your INR.

If this applies to you, please tell any doctor who is prescribing for you or the pharmacist if you are buying over-the-counter medicines, that you take leflunomide.

## Can I take leflunomide if I plan to start a family?

No. Women who are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant and those who are breast feeding, **must not take leflunomide**. Men who want to father a child must not have taken leflunomide for a period of three months.

Both male and female patients taking leflunomide must use reliable contraception. If a pregnancy is planned, the leflunomide must be stopped two years before trying for a baby. This period may be shortened to three months if a special 'washout' treatment is used. This involves taking a drug to help remove leflunomide from your body. If you are considering a pregnancy, please talk to your consultant first.

If you think you are pregnant, you must stop taking leflunomide at once and consult your GP.

## Chickenpox and shingles

If you are taking leflunomide and are unsure whether you had chickenpox or shingles in the past, you may be at risk of severe infection from the varicella zoster virus, which causes chickenpox and shingles. If you come into close contact with someone who has either of these conditions, you should contact your consultant promptly as you may need special treatment.

## Do I need to take any other precautions?

If you have had tuberculosis (TB) in the past, tell your consultant as you will need to be monitored to make sure it does not become active again.

You should avoid vaccination with **live vaccines**; these include yellow fever, polio, shingles, measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) and rubella (German measles). Always let your GP know that you are taking leflunomide before having a vaccination.

**We recommend that you have the annual flu vaccination.**

Alcohol should be avoided whilst taking leflunomide as it may increase the likelihood of liver damage.

## What alternatives are there to this treatment?

You do not have to take this treatment and can always discuss alternatives with the Rheumatology Department. Some people find that complementary therapy treatment is useful and leaflets about this, provided by Arthritis Research Council, are available in our clinics.

Over-the-counter medications may be used alone or in combination with prescribed medication you are taking; however, you are always advised to discuss these with your consultant before taking them. Medication bought over the counter may help to control your pain but **not always** the condition. Always tell the pharmacist which prescribed medications you are already taking when buying over-the-counter drugs.

Remember, while you are on this medication, it is your responsibility to ensure you have regular blood tests and it is important that you do not miss any of these tests. If your hospital appointment is rescheduled, contact the rheumatology helpline if you need more blood forms.

## Can I find out more?

You can find out more from the following:

### Arthritis Care

**Tel:** 0808 800 4050

**Website:** [www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

### NHS Choices

**Website:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

Under review

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

Rheumatology helpline on 01384 244789 (this is an answer machine so please do not use this helpline in an emergency)

or speak to your pharmacist

**This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:**

<http://dudleygroup.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/rheumatology/>

**This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 0730510**

ਜੇਕਰ ਇਹ ਲੀਫਲੈਟ (ਛੋਟਾ ਇਸ਼ਤਿਹਾਰ) ਤੁਸੀਂ ਆਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ (ਪੰਜਾਬੀ) ਵਿੱਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ ਤਾਂ ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਕਰ ਕੇ ਪੇਸ਼ਟ ਇੰਫਰਮੇਸ਼ਨ ਕੋ-ਆਰਡੀਨੇਟਰ ਨਾਲ **0800 0730510** ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਨੰਬਰ ਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

यदि आपको यह दस्तावेज़ अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो पेशन्ट इनफरमेशन को-आरडीनेटर को टेलीफोन नम्बर **0800 0730510** पर फ़ोन करें।

જો તમને આ પત્રિકા તમારી પોતાની ભાષા (ગુજરાતી)માં જોઈતી હોય, તો કૃપા કરીને પેશન્ટ ઇન્ફર્મેશન કો-ઓર્ડિનેટરનો **0800 0730510** પર સંપર્ક કરો.

আপনি যদি এই প্রচারপত্রটি আপনার নিজের ভাষায় পোতে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে পেশেন্ট ইনফরমেশন কো-অর্ডিনেটরের সাথে **0800 0730510** এই নম্বরে যোগাযোগ করুন।

إذا كنت ترغب هذه الوريقة مترجمة بلغتك الاصلية ( اللغة العربية ) . فرجاء ا اتصل بمنسق المعلومات للمريض  
**0800 0730510** على الشفون **Information Co-ordinator**

حسب ضرورت اس لىف لٹ کو اپنی زبان (آردو) میں حاصل کرنے کے لئے راجھو برائی ٹیلیفون نمبر **0800 0730510** پر رجوعت فرمائیے۔ اور دیکھو (مریضوں کے لئے معلومات کی فرہمی کے سلسلے میں) کے ساتھ رابطہ کریں۔