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Treating rheumatoid arthritis

“Non-biologic” drugs are a better first choice

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a serious condition. The body’s immune system attacks the lining of the joints. This causes swelling, stiffness, and pain.

RA cannot be cured but it can be treated. Without treatment, RA can cause permanent damage to joints and internal organs, and disability.

How is RA treated?

The main drugs to treat RA are called DMARDs (disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs). These drugs help prevent damage to joints. They include both non-biologics and biologics.

Non-biologic RA drugs have been used for a long time.

Biologics are a newer type of RA drug. They are one of the top-selling prescription drugs in the U.S. However, in most cases, biologics should not be the first choice for treatment, according to the American College of Rheumatology. Here’s why:



Non-biologics can be effective, and they cost much less.

Non-biologics are available as generics. Biologics are not, and they cost from \$20,000 to \$50,000 a year.

Biologics can have rare but serious side effects.

The following side effects are rare, but they can be serious or life-threatening:

- Serious skin or lung infections
- Skin cancers
- Serious allergic reactions

Other side effects are less serious: minor infections, headache, and reactions at the injection site. People usually don't change treatments because of these side effects.

Non-biologics may be a safer choice.

Non-biologic RA drugs are better studied than the biologics. Non-biologics include:

- Methotrexate (Rheumatrex, Trexall, and generic)
- Leflunomide (Arava and generic)
- Hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil and generic)
- Sulfasalazine (Azulfidine and generic)

When to take a biologic drug.

Most people should try a non-biologic RA drug for at least three months. If you do not feel better or move more easily after three months, you should talk with your doctor about biologics.

If a non-biologic did not help you, there's a good chance that a biologic will give relief.

People react to drugs differently. If one biologic does not help, you can try another. But never take two biologic drugs at the same time.

In rare cases, your doctor may skip more common treatments and go straight to biologics. This may make sense if your RA is already advanced when it is first diagnosed. Check with your doctor about using this aggressive approach to treatment.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Tips to help with rheumatoid arthritis

RA affects other parts of the body as well as the joints. It is important to take care of yourself and pay attention to your health. You should:

- **Stay active.** Studies show that regular exercise reduces pain, increases energy, and improves sleep. Gentle exercises such as swimming or water aerobics are very helpful.
- **Get your bones checked.** Talk to your doctor about getting a bone density test. RA can cause bone loss. Common RA drugs like prednisone and other corticosteroids also cause bone loss.
- **Have your cholesterol checked.** RA patients are more likely to have unhealthy cholesterol levels. Levels of good HDL cholesterol may be too low.
- **Get vaccinated.** RA and some of the drugs to treat it can increase the risk of infection. It is important to stay up to date on your shots. Be sure to get your flu and pneumonia vaccines. Talk to your doctor before you get a shot. It may be important to avoid "live" vaccines.
- **Manage stress.** Stress can increase swelling and pain. Try ways to manage stress without drugs. You can reduce symptoms and improve quality of life with meditation, breathing techniques, support groups, and counseling.

