



Hydroxychloroquine (*Plaquenil*)

Description

Hydroxychloroquine (*Plaquenil*) is considered a disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug (DMARD) because it can decrease the pain and swelling of arthritis, and it may prevent joint damage and reduce the risk of long-term disability.

Fast Facts

- Hydroxychloroquine often is used for mild rheumatoid arthritis or in combination with other drugs for more severe disease.
- Hydroxychloroquine is commonly used to manage multiple complications of lupus and connective tissue disorders.
- Hydroxychloroquine is a relatively safe medication, though monitoring by an ophthalmologist is recommended while taking this drug.

Uses

Hydroxychloroquine is in a class of medications that was first used to prevent and treat malaria. Today it is used to treat [rheumatoid arthritis](#), some symptoms of [lupus](#), [juvenile rheumatoid arthritis](#), and other autoimmune diseases, though these diseases are not caused by malaria parasites.

How it works

It is not clear why hydroxychloroquine is effective at treating autoimmune diseases. It is believed that hydroxychloroquine interferes with communication of cells in the immune system.

Dosing

Hydroxychloroquine generally is given to adults in doses of 200 mg or 400 mg per day. In some cases, higher doses can be used.

Time to effect

Symptoms can start to improve in 1-2 months, but it may take up to 6 months before full benefits of this medication are experienced.



Side effects

Hydroxychloroquine typically is very well tolerated, and serious side effects are rare. The most common side effects are nausea and diarrhea, which often improve with time or by taking the medication with food. Less common side effects include skin rashes, changes in skin pigment or hair changes (bleaching or thinning of hair), and weakness. Rarely, hydroxychloroquine can lead to anemia in some individuals.

In rare cases, hydroxychloroquine has caused visual changes or loss of vision, but such vision problems are more likely to occur in individuals taking high doses for many years, or in persons 60 years or older or with significant kidney disease. The dose used today is lower than the one originally used to treat arthritis or malaria. At the current recommended dose, development of visual problems while taking this medication is extremely unusual.

Points to remember

Although vision problems and loss of sight while taking hydroxychloroquine for the treatment of lupus or arthritis are very rare, notify your doctor if you notice any changes in your vision. Your doctor also may suggest regular eye exams while taking this medication. Visual changes experienced by the patient early on or seen early during regular eye exams usually improve after stopping the medication.

If you are pregnant or are considering having a child, discuss this with your doctor before taking this medication. Although hydroxychloroquine use might be safe during pregnancy, any medication taken during pregnancy should be discussed with a doctor.

Drug interactions

Although there are few drug interactions with hydroxychloroquine, to be safe be sure to tell your doctor about all of the medications you are taking, including over-the-counter drugs and natural remedies.

Information to Discuss with Your Primary Care Physician and other Specialists

Be sure to notify your other physicians that you are taking this drug. This drug does not have a strong effect on the immune system, so vaccines recommended by other physicians are generally acceptable. Be sure to notify your ophthalmologist that you are taking this medicine so you can have the correct visual screening tests.

For more information

The American College of Rheumatology has compiled this list to give you a starting point for your own additional research. The ACR does not endorse or maintain these Web sites, and is not responsible for any information or claims provided on them. It is always best to talk with your rheumatologist for more information and before making any decisions about your care.

National Institutes of Health Medline Plus link

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/meds/a601240.html>

ACR Position Statement on screening for hydroxychloroquine retinopathy

<http://www.rheumatology.org/publications/position/hydroxy.asp?aud=prs>



Lupus Foundation of America on Anti-Malarials in Lupus

http://www.lupus.org/webmodules/webarticlesnet/templates/new_aboutaffects.aspx?articleid=87&zoneid=17

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Written by Michael Cannon, MD, and reviewed by the American College of Rheumatology Patient Education Task Force.

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