

## **SULFASALAZINE (SALAZOPYRIN)**

### **What is Sulfasalazine?**

A combination of aspirin-like anti-inflammatory (5 - aminosalicylic acid) component and a sulphur antibiotic-like component (sulfapyridine)

It is used to treat:

Rheumatoid Arthritis, Psoriatic Arthritis, Inflammatory Bowel Disease and some other autoimmune conditions.

### **How does Sulfasalazine work?**

It is a disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drug (DMARD). It reduces the activity of the immune system and lowers inflammation in the body. In arthritis these actions reduces pain, swelling and stiffness, prevent or limits joint damage and reduces the risk of long-term disability.

### **How is Sulfasalazine taken?**

It is an enteric coated tablet (500 mg), which should be taken, orally, with or after meals with a full glass of water to avoid side effects. The tablet should not be broken, crushed or chewed.

Treatment is often started at low doses, to prevent side effects, typically 1 or 2 tablets a day.

The dose is gradually increased each week.

Like other DMARDs, sulfasalazine is a long-term treatment and usually takes 6 – 12 weeks to notice any improvement. Treatment with sulfasalazine may be continued indefinitely as long as it is effective and no side effects occur.

If you forget to take a sulfasalazine dose, take the next scheduled dose as normal. Do not make up the missed dose.

### **What are the side effects?**

Most Common:

- Loss of appetite and nausea (feeling sick).
- Reflux, diarrhoea and abdominal pain.
- Orange discolouration of body fluids (e.g. urine and perspiration). Contact lenses, particularly extended wear soft lenses, may be permanently stained.
- Headache or slight dizziness.
- Skin rashes, mouth ulcers.
- “Sulphur” drugs can cause a temperature (“drug fever”).

### **Less Common/Rare:**

Ringing in the ears

In males, a lowered sperm count can occur which may result in temporary sulfasalazine infertility. In most cases this is reversible on stopping sulphasalazine.

Increased sensitivity to the sun.

Blood counts: Sulfasalazine can cause a drop in the number of white blood cells, which are needed to fight infection. Regular blood tests aim to pick this problem up early. If you develop a sore mouth, mouth ulcers, infection or fever tell your doctor straight away.

People with an inherited blood disorder called G6PD deficiency have a significant risk of blood count problems when taking sulfasalazine.

Liver inflammation: Hepatitis (liver inflammation) may also occur. This is usually mild and does not cause symptoms, so regular blood tests are important. The problem resolves if the treatment is stopped.

Other rare effects include reversible lung inflammation and pins and needles in the hands and feet.

### **What precautions are necessary?**

Blood tests

Since sulfasalazine may affect the blood cells and liver, you must have regular blood tests during your treatment. This is important, as you may not get symptoms with these problems.

Blood tests are particularly important during the first few months of treatment and when sulfasalazine is taken with methotrexate and/or leflunomide.

As well as monitoring for side effects, blood tests help to monitor your condition to determine if the treatment is effective.

Blood tests to monitor full blood count and liver functions will be required regularly throughout the treatment. Your doctor will advise on the frequency of these tests.

Precautions with other diseases or conditions

You should not take sulfasalazine if you have sensitivity to aspirin compounds or sulphur containing medicines such as sulphur antibiotics (e.g. Bactrim or Septrim).

If you have blood, kidney or liver disorders your doctor will discuss your medical history to decide whether this treatment is suitable for you.

#### Use with other medicines

Sulfasalazine may interfere with warfarin, cyclosporine, digoxin, so dose adjustments may be needed if these medications are needed to be taken together.

Antacids can slow the absorption of sulfasalazine. Do not take antacids within 2 hours of taking sulfasalazine.

Sulfasalazine can increase the risk for liver injury if given with isoniazid.

Most vaccines can be given safely with sulfasalazine. Talk with your rheumatologist before receiving any vaccines.

#### Use with alcohol

Because sulfasalazine can affect your liver, you should avoid heavy alcohol use while taking it.

#### Use in pregnancy and breastfeeding

Sulfasalazine has been used safely in pregnancy and breastfeeding. Should you wish to become pregnant or you intend to breastfeed, you should discuss this with your doctor.