

# Hydroxychloroquine – what you can expect when starting treatment

**This information sheet will help you understand what to expect when starting treatment with hydroxychloroquine. It is not a substitute for talking with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.**

## What is hydroxychloroquine?

Hydroxychloroquine is a medicine used to:

- treat rheumatoid arthritis ([www.arthritis.org.nz/information/forms-of-arthritis/rheumatoid-arthritis/](http://www.arthritis.org.nz/information/forms-of-arthritis/rheumatoid-arthritis/))
- treat systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) and other connective tissue diseases ([www.lupus.org.nz/index.php](http://www.lupus.org.nz/index.php))
- prevent malaria
- treat malaria.

Hydroxychloroquine is available in New Zealand as a tablet.

## What side effects might I notice when I start taking hydroxychloroquine?

As with all medicines, some people may experience side effects from taking hydroxychloroquine.

### Effects on the eye

The most important side effect of hydroxychloroquine is on the eye.

Blurred vision may occur in the first few weeks after starting hydroxychloroquine. This usually returns to normal even when you continue taking the tablets. Talk to your doctor if you are worried.

Taking high doses (600 mg per day) of hydroxychloroquine over a long time (more than five years) can also cause damage to your retina, the light-sensitive coating at the back of your eye. For this reason, you will be asked to attend eye screening tests.

It is important to tell your doctor if you have any eye problems at any time while you are taking hydroxychloroquine.

### Eye tests

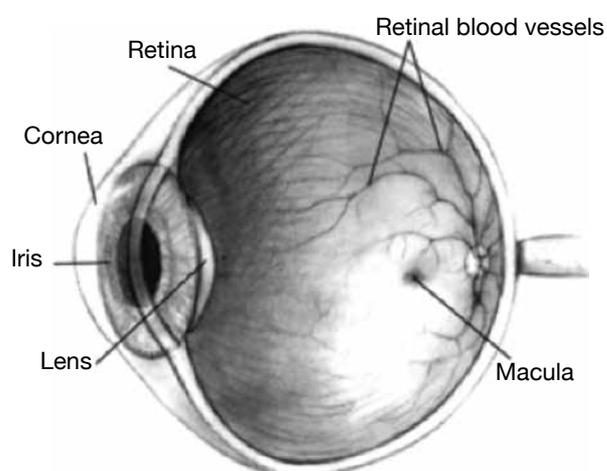
Your optometrist or ophthalmologist should perform eye tests in your first year of treatment with hydroxychloroquine. You must also have another eye test in your fifth year of treatment unless your doctor recommends a test sooner.

Some factors might mean you may need an early eye test. These factors include:

- liver or kidney problems
- being over 65 years old when you start your treatment
- any eye problem.

The eye tests you are most likely to have are Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) and visual fields.

OCT is a test that takes a picture of your eye so your eye specialist can measure the thickness of your retina (see image below). This way they can check for damage.



Visual fields is a commonly used test that measures how well you can see. Your eye specialist can use this test to work out if you are having trouble seeing in certain areas.

### What happens if there are changes in my eye?

Your eye specialist will tell you the results of your eye tests.

Your rheumatologist or dermatologist will decide if you need to:

- have tests more often
- take less hydroxychloroquine
- change to another medicine.

## Other side effects

You may also experience other side effects.

Table 1 includes side effects that you may experience and what to do if you do experience them.

Not everyone who takes hydroxychloroquine will have a side effect. If you think you are having a side effect from your medicines, talk to your doctor as soon as possible.

Check the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) for your medicine at: [www.medsafe.govt.nz/Medicines/infoSearch.asp](http://www.medsafe.govt.nz/Medicines/infoSearch.asp)

Please report any side effects from a medicine to the Centre for Adverse Reactions Monitoring (CARM) <https://nzphvc.otago.ac.nz/report/>

## Can I take other medicines when I am taking hydroxychloroquine?

Hydroxychloroquine may react with other medicines. Tell your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you are taking any other medicines, including those bought in the supermarket and any supplements or natural health products.

Your doctor or pharmacist will check if the products are OK to take with hydroxychloroquine.

**Table 1: Possible side effects and what to do if you experience them**

Side effect	How many people	Action to take
Blurred vision	10 in 1,000	Continue taking medicine if this is in first few weeks of treatment. Talk to your doctor if you are worried.
Eye damage	1 in 1,000	Attend your regular eye checks. If you have any eye problems, contact your doctor as soon as possible.
Allergic reactions or bad skin reactions	Not known	Get urgent medical attention.
Frequent infections	Less than 1 in 1,000	Tell your doctor as soon as possible.
Low blood sugar (such as anxiety, heart racing, sweating, hunger, shakiness and pale skin)	Less than 1 in 1,000	Get urgent medical attention.
Bruising more easily than normal	Less than 1 in 1,000	Tell your doctor as soon as possible.
Muscle weakness, cramps, stiffness or tingling	Not known	Tell your doctor at your next visit.
Ringing in your ears	Not known	Tell your doctor at your next visit.
Nausea	100 in 1,000	Tell your doctor if you notice this and it is worrying you.
Vomiting	10 in 1,000	Tell your doctor if you notice this and it is worrying you.
Headaches	10 in 1,000	Tell your doctor if you notice this and it is worrying you.
Dizziness	10 in 1,000	Tell your doctor if you notice this and it is worrying you.
Nervousness	1 in 1,000	Tell your doctor if you notice this and it is worrying you.