



Living with pulmonary fibrosis: Anti-fibrotic medications

Pirfenidone



Disclaimer

This resource provides some information about the anti-fibrotic medication, pirfenidone. It does not contain all the available information and **does not take the place of talking to your doctor or pharmacist**. Always seek the guidance of your doctor or other qualified health professional for any questions you may have regarding medications, your health or medical conditions. Please refer to the full Consumer Medicine Information leaflet linked below for a more detailed guide to side effects and safety precautions.

Why is this medication being recommended?

Pirfenidone is an anti-fibrotic medication that interferes with the process that causes fibrosis (scarring) in the lungs. This can help to slow down the build-up of scar tissue that occurs in pulmonary fibrosis.

How do I start taking pirfenidone?

When starting pirfenidone, your doctor will tell you how much to take and when to take it. It is available as either a tablet and is usually taken three times a day with food at breakfast, lunch and dinner. Your dose will typically be increased each week to start with; for example, one tablet three times a day for the first week, then two tablets three times a day for the second week and three tablets three times a day thereafter. You will need to have regular blood tests, usually monthly to start with and then every three months.

Your doctor might adjust your dose if necessary. Once you are stabilised on three tablets, three times per day, you will be able to switch to the higher strength tablets, enabling you to take one tablet three times per day to achieve the same dose.

What special precautions should I follow?

Before taking pirfenidone:

- Talk to your doctor about any medical conditions you may have or previously had.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you have had a previous allergy to pirfenidone or are allergic to any other medications.
- Tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are taking other prescription and non-prescription medications, vitamins, nutritional supplements, and herbal products. Your doctor may need to change the dose of your medications or monitor you carefully for side effects.
- Tell your doctor if you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breast-feeding.

While taking pirfenidone:

- Take pirfenidone with food or immediately after food. Swallow the medication whole with a full glass of water to help reduce the risks of side effects.
- It is advised not to drink grapefruit juice or eat grapefruit as it may increase blood levels of pirfenidone and lead to more side effects.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember, but make sure each dose is separated by three hours. Do not take two doses at the same time and do not take more than three doses per day.
- Do not stop taking your medicine or lower the dosage without checking with your doctor.
- Regular check-ups and tests are required to prevent unwanted side effects.
- Be sun smart - wear a long sleeve shirt, hat and SPF 50 sunscreen while in the sun to reduce the risk of rash.
- If you become pregnant, tell your doctor immediately.
- Do not breastfeed while you are taking this medication.

What side effects can this medication cause?

Pirfenidone may have unwanted side effects in some people. You should tell your doctor or pharmacist as soon as possible if you develop any of these or other side effects or do not feel well while taking pirfenidone.

Common side effects that can occur in people treated with pirfenidone include the following:



Skin

- Skin reactions including sunburn from sunlight, sunlamps or tanning beds. All patients taking pirfenidone should use SPF 50 sunscreen and other protective measures from the sun.
 - This is very important for people living in Australia where UV light exposure is generally high.
- Rash or itchy skin.



Gut

- Changes in taste, loss of appetite and/or weight loss.
- Stomach problems such as indigestion, heartburn and/or acid reflux, bloating, stomach pain or discomfort and passing wind.
- Diarrhoea or constipation (note: diarrhoea can usually be controlled safely with anti-diarrhoeal medication such as loperamide).
- Nausea or vomiting that continues even after you take anti-nausea medicine.



Liver

- There is a small risk of developing abnormal liver function tests and blood tests are recommended to monitor for this.

- The symptoms of abnormal liver tests are non-specific but may include feeling more tired than usual or abdominal pain.



Other

- Headache, dizziness, muscle aches or pains.
- Joint pain.
- Difficulty sleeping and/or tiredness.

Some side effects can be serious. The following side effects are uncommon, but if you experience any of these, contact your doctor immediately:

- Yellow skin or yellow in the white part of your eyes.
- Dark or brown coloured urine.
- Severe stomach pain.
- Bleeding or bruising more easily than usual.

What monitoring will I need?

Your GP or lung specialist will order regular blood tests to monitor for side effects. You will need to have your liver tests checked monthly for the first three to six months, then every three months. There may be additional tests ordered by your doctor depending on the results.

Your specialist will also review you to discuss any other side effects you may be experiencing. They will also continue to monitor your lung function (breathing tests) over time to map out the progress of your lung condition.

Typically, scripts for pirfenidone provide you with a six-month supply of the medication. These will need to be reviewed periodically depending on your progress.



FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs

External Links

- Anti-fibrotic Treatments for IPF fact sheet - Lung Foundation Australia

[Lungfoundation.com.au](https://lungfoundation.com.au) | Freecall 1800 654 301 | enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au

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Note to reader: This information is intended as a general guide only and is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Lung Foundation Australia, the Centre of Research Excellence in Pulmonary Fibrosis and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided. Always consult with your doctor about matters that affect your health.