

Treating Rheumatoid Arthritis: Are Biologic Drugs Right for You?

What is rheumatoid arthritis (RA)?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a serious condition. The body's immune system attacks the lining of the joints, causing swelling, stiffness, and pain. If RA is not treated, it can lead to permanent joint damage and disability. It can be hard to diagnose RA because many other conditions cause similar symptoms. The exact cause is not known.

What are biologic DMARDs?

Biologics are a kind of DMARD (Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drug). These are drugs used to treat RA.

Biologics do not cure RA, but they do ease symptoms. And they may help prevent more damage to your joints. However, they can cause serious side effects. You should try other treatments first.

Try other treatments before using biologics.

There are safer and less costly drugs to try first, including nonbiologic DMARDs, such as:

- hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil and generic)
- sulfasalazine (Azulfidine and generic)
- minocycline (Dynacin, Minocin, and generic)
- methotrexate (Rheumatrex and generic)

Your doctor may also recommend pain relievers, such as:

- ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, and generic)
- naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn, and generic)
- corticosteroids, such as prednisone

Exercise programs can help relieve pain, increase strength, and keep you independent.

Choosing a biologic.

If other treatments don't help enough, you and your doctor may want to try a biologic. You may need to try several to find one that helps you. Tell your doctor about all your health conditions and medicines. Ask about taking biologics safely. You will need to protect yourself from infections while taking biologics. And women should not get pregnant while taking them.

Biologics can have serious side effects.

More serious, life-threatening side effects include:

- Allergic reactions
- Bacterial infections, such as tuberculosis
- Lymphoma
- Liver damage

There are also less serious side effects:

- Diarrhea
- Headache
- Injection site reactions, like pain or itching
- Nausea
- Respiratory and urinary tract infections

Our advice:

We compared nine different biologics.

- All of the biologics are costly—over \$1,100 per month.
- They are injected either daily, weekly, or less often—at the doctor's office or at home.
- All provide similar relief of symptoms, but they differ in safety and side effects.

We chose the following as our *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*. These drugs rated best in safety, cost, and how well they work. They may have fewer side effects. All are available as generics:

 **Abatacept (Orencia)**

 **Adalimumab (Humira)**

 **Etanercept (Enbrel)**

The chart on the next page can help you compare costs.









Biologics can help relieve RA symptoms,
but try other treatments first.

Biologics: Drug Comparison Chart

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs are in blue. We recommend these drugs because they work as well and are as safe as the other drugs, and they cost less.

Our analysis is based on a scientific review by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. This is a summary of a longer, more detailed report you can find at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org.

Best Buy	Generic Name & Strength	Brand Name	How Often to Use	Average Cost per Month ^A
	Abatacept 125 mg/mL^B	Orencia	Every 4 weeks for intravenous injection Once a week for subcutaneous injection	\$2,215 \$2,737
	Adalimumab 40 mg, injectable kit	Humira	Every week or every other week	Taken every other week: \$2,632 Taken every week: \$5,264
	Adalimumab 40 mg, pen injector	Humira	Every week or every other week	Taken every other week: \$2,654 Taken every week: \$5,308
	Anakinra 100 mg, disposable syringes	Kineret	Daily	\$1,796
	Certolizumab 400 mg, injectable kit	Cimzia	Every other week	\$2,739
	Etanercept 25 mg, prefilled syringe	Enbrel	Once a week	\$1,197
	Etanercept 50 mg, prefilled syringe	Enbrel	Once a week	\$2,444
	Etanercept 50 mg, pen injector	Enbrel	Once a week	\$2,690
	Golimumab 50 mg, prefilled syringe	Simponi	Every 4 weeks	\$2,880
	Golimumab 50 mg, pen injector	Simponi	Every 4 weeks	\$2,864
	Infliximab 100 mg ^B	Remicade	Every 4 to 8 weeks ^C	Given every 8 weeks: \$2,296 ^D Given every 4 weeks: \$4,592 ^D
	Rituximab 10 mg/mL	Rituxan	Every 24 weeks ^C	\$1,324 ^D
	Tocilizumab 200 mg/10 mL	Actemra	Every 4 weeks	\$1,797 ^E
	Tocilizumab 400 mg/20 mL	Actemra	Every 4 weeks	\$1,825 ^E

^A Prices are based on nationwide average retail prices for December 2012. *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* obtained prices from data provided by Source Healthcare Analytics, Inc., which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations. The price listed is for the medication only and does not include administration or other fees that could be incurred.

^B Calculated price is based on an assumed body weight of 75 kg (165 pounds) and a dose of 6.5 mg/kg.

^C Refers to an average interval; number of infusions required varies among people.

^D A typical course requires closer intervals in the beginning. Average costs during the first year of treatment, therefore, may be substantially higher.

^E Price might be unreliable because it is based on less than 20 prescriptions.

This series is produced by Consumer Reports and *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*, a public information project supported by grants from the state Attorney General Consumer and Prescriber Education Grant Program which is funded by the multi-state settlement of consumer fraud claims regarding the marketing of the prescription drug Neurontin. This brief should not be viewed as a substitute for a consultation with a medical or health professional. It is provided to enhance communication with your doctor, not replace it.