

## Septin (cotrimoxazol)

Septin or Bactrim are the commercial names of a combination of antibiotics called cotrimoxazol. Cotrimoxazol is the main drug used in the treatment and the prevention of Pneumocystis carinii (PCP).

### Prevention

People with HIV run the risk of contracting PCP when their CD4 count is less than 200. At this point, doctors recommend that the medicine is started to reduce the risk of PCP. This is known as prophylaxis.

PCP is a potentially fatal illness that used to be the main cause of death in people with AIDS. It is now less common as a result of the use of prophylaxis against PCP and the development of better treatments for people who develop the disease.

Septin is the most effective drug in the prevention of the PCP, especially in people with counts of CD4 below 100. This drug also reduces the risk of toxoplasmosis, an infection that can affect the brain. The most common dose of prophylaxis consists of two tablets (960mg) every day. There is an alternative dose of one tablet three times a week

### Treatment

Septin is also the first option used to treat people who develop PCP. The dose that is used to treat PCP is greater than the one used to prevent it. In some cases, an intravenous form is used instead of tablets. Five to seven days can pass before you begin to feel better and, generally, the treatment lasts for two or three weeks. After the drug has been administered satisfactorily, it is important to follow a prophylaxis against PCP to reduce the risk of re-infection. This is known as therapy maintenance or secondary prophylaxis.

### Side Effects

Some people are allergic to Septin and develop side effects such as rashes or fever. In those people who experienced side effects, they generally occurred in the second week of taking the medicine. In rare cases these reactions

can be serious, in which case a doctor should be notified immediately.

Anaemia (low red blood cell count) is the second most common side effect seen with the highest doses used to treat PCP. It can also affect people who use Septin for prophylaxis. Some people experience a lack of white blood cells. This indirect effect in the blood is most common if you are taking certain medicines such as AZT or ganciclovir. Some people who also take Septin experience blood problems. Blood tests can monitor your blood cell levels and blood function. People with kidney problems may need to take lower doses. Other possible side effects of Septin include reduced levels of folic acid (a type of vitamin B) in the body, which can be treated with a prescription of folic acid, and a decrease in the effectiveness of oral contraceptives.

### Desensitization

Since Septin constitutes the best form of prophylaxis against PCP, doctors often try to minimize any allergic reactions that you may have. They may suggest that you try it again a few weeks later, although they don't always know whether the allergy is caused by Septin or by other drugs. In some cases, you may get over the allergy by beginning the treatment again with very small doses and increasing them gradually until they reach normal levels. This is known as desensitization.

Many people who experience an initial reaction to Septin can desensitize themselves this way. Nevertheless, it is better not to try it on your own but only under medical supervision. If your allergic reaction is serious, it is not advisable to take the drug again unless under close medical supervision.

### Alternatives

If you cannot take Septin, there are several alternatives that can provide some protection from PCP, including pen-tamidina aerosols, dapsona, trimetoprima and atovucona.