

# Smart drug could ease those joints

A new medicine will allow patients crippled by rheumatoid arthritis to lead near normal lives – but not everyone will be able to benefit from the treatments. ADRIAN LEE reports

**T**HE arrival of a group of new arthritis drugs has offered a ray of hope for tens of thousands of rheumatoid arthritis sufferers in the UK. This debilitating condition, which comes in up to 200 different forms, affects the joints, leaving them swollen and inflamed.

A study published in *The Lancet* last week found that the drugs slowed progression of the disease and reduced its symptoms. However, experts warn that the newer medication is not suitable

for everyone and as they have not yet been approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), there are doubts over patients' chances of getting hold of them. Here's what you need to know.

**WHAT ARE THE NEW DRUGS AND HOW DO THEY WORK?**

The drugs are MabThera (also known as rituximab) and Orenzia (abatacept). Everyone's immune system is driven by white blood cells, which help to fight infections. Among arthritis patients the cells are overactive. MabThera targets B cells, while Orenzia stops the abnormal activation of T cells.

**HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE THEY?**

Trials on patients have shown the drugs can reduce the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis by up to 50 per cent. They have been found to work especially well in severe cases and where existing treatments have failed, or only caused a moderate improvement. One expert, Professor Paul Emery, of the University of Leeds, describes them as "strikingly effective". It is claimed that using the drugs will allow some sufferers to lead a near normal life, almost free from pain. Dr Anthony Hammond, a consultant rheumatologist at Maidstone Hospital, adds: "These new drugs, allied with existing treatments, will mean there are effective therapies available for most patients. It is a major step forward."

**WILL THEY HELP ALL SUFFERERS?**

Patients who do not respond to other treatments will benefit most. Medical trials suggest that significant numbers will see big improvements but because the condition affects people in different ways, the new drugs won't work for all.

**WHEN WILL THEY BE AVAILABLE?**

Both MabThera and Orenzia have been licensed for use in the UK, which means they have been found to be safe and can be offered immediately.

**ARE THEY AVAILABLE ON THE NHS FOR EVERYONE?**

No. NICE has not yet approved the drugs for general NHS use. It will weigh up the costs and benefits before making a decision. In the meantime, individual health trusts can fund the treatments but availability could be patchy. The two licensed drugs are available privately.

**ANY SIDE EFFECTS?**

All drugs have some side effects but the new treatments compare favourably with others. In trials, there was an increased risk of infection but no other major side effects were found. Only when the drugs have been in use for several years will the picture become clear.

**WHAT ABOUT EXISTING TREATMENTS?**

The inflammation that causes arthritis is created by tumour necrosis factor (TNF), which stimulates cells. There are anti-TNF drugs, which work by blocking chemical messengers produced by the body. The main ones are Humira, Enbrel and Remicade, which will continue to be a treatment for moderate and severe rheumatoid arthritis.

The NHS will normally provide only one and even if it does not work well, patients cannot try a different anti-TNF treatment. But NICE has just said that it will review that guideline.

Seven out of 10 patients respond to anti-TNFs, which themselves are a quite recent breakthrough.

Disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) are given soon after diagnosis to slow down the disease – the most popular is methotrexate. Steroids can also reduce inflammation.

● **National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society:** [rheumatoid.org.uk](http://rheumatoid.org.uk); helpline 0800 288 7650.  
● **Arthritis Research Campaign:** [www.arc.org.uk](http://www.arc.org.uk).

Picture: WENDY KIMPTON/KNP



I'd given up hope – but now I've got my life back

**A** NEW treatment transformed Terry Barnard's life after she suffered more than 40 years of crippling pain. The former company secretary, from Chatham, Kent, was among patients selected for trials of Orenzia. For Terry, who hadn't responded to a host of other drugs, the results were amazing.

"It was fabulous," she says. "After just two or three weeks the swelling all over my body – hands, wrists, elbows and knees – went down. I have been able to do needlework and gardening again and I've stopped using an electric scooter."

Terry, 69, was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis when she was 23 and pregnant with her second child. "It was absolutely appalling," she says. "I was told I would be in a wheelchair by the time I was 40."

"Over the years the pain and inflammation got steadily worse, apart from one period of remission. I tried everything but nothing seemed to help."

Terry also took part in trials for three anti-TNF drugs but suffered an allergic reaction and saw no improvement. She says: "I'd almost given up hope when I began taking Orenzia last year but it's resulted in an 80 per cent improvement." At Maidstone Hospital, she was given the drug for five months but now the trial has ended she must wait to discover if her health trust will fund the treatment.

"While I'm waiting, I'm beginning to deteriorate again," she says. "These new treatments should be offered to anyone who needs them. This drug has given me back my life."

**I**T'S a dog's life. One moment you're doing nothing more strenuous than fetching your owner's slippers and chasing the odd squirrel, the next you're on a cross country run and pulling your master via a giant elastic band.

At least you are if you're one of the 700-odd dogs that take part in the Cani-Cross season. Cani-Cross (or Canix) is short for Canine Cross Country and is essentially just that – cross-country running with your dog.

Popular in the US and Europe, the sport is rapidly growing in the UK which is famously a nation of dog-lovers and home to six million hounds. It's all thanks to organisers Eileen and Richard Cook from Cheltenham.

"Last year was our first full season and more than 700 people competed at the eight events that we organised," says Eileen, who has 14 races planned for the second season which starts in September.

Each Canix event has two different courses, a 2.5km (1.5 miles) route and 5km (three miles) circuit with a season finale half marathon. It is open to all-comers with different classes depending on age, sex and whether you run with one dog or two. Runners range in age from 11 to 67 and the dogs include any breed from great Danes and Jack Russells to springer spaniels and even poodles.

**A**S I arrive at Eileen and Richard's offices, I'm hoping they've chosen a suitably small four-legged friend to accompany me on my first run. Something not too fast – the likes of which might normally be seen cradled in the arms of Paris Hilton. But my leg muscles wince in anticipation as Richard introduces me to Alexi, a six-year-old husky. I wonder whether swapping my trainers for roller skates would be considered cheating.

"The dog isn't a tractor so don't expect her to be pulling you up the hills," explains Richard. "Alexi will adapt herself to your pace but many people find their dog acts as a source of encouragement and helps them improve their running speed. It's kind of like having a four-legged personal trainer."

One look at some of their fastest times during last season leaves you in no doubt about the strength of the combination. A 5km time of just over 15 minutes is pretty swift and a half-marathon time of an hour and 26 minutes is really impressive.

One of the competitors is Caroline

**ON THE RUN:** Nat Barnes with his Canix partner Alexi

Picture: ANDY SHORT



Martin, a 34-year-old graphic designer from Somerset who competes with Nora, her Staffordshire bull terrier cross. "Nora is an ex-rescue dog and Canix is good for dogs with behavioural problems because of the exercise and focus that it takes," she says. "But it's a team effort so if you don't put in as much as your dog, you're not going to get very far."

The health and wellbeing of the dogs is paramount. Vets are on call at every event, there are regular water stops and the temperature is closely monitored. Anything above 16C can see the dogs get dehydrated. Dogs also have to be more than a year old to ensure their muscles and bones have fully developed.

Although running with a traditional collar and lead is fine, many Canix runners use a harness, which looks like a long bungee cord attached to a padded belt that sits on the runner's hips. This enables the dog to use its more powerful chest and shoulder muscles to pull, while

# THE FOUR-LEGGED PERSONAL TRAINER

Canine Cross Country – where runners race attached to their dogs – is set to be this year's biggest exercise craze. NAT BARNES gives it a try

also keeping the runner's hands free. Alexi is excited as we start our run. She sets off at a lightning pace and initially, having the bungee cord attached is an odd sensation. But as both Alexi and I adjust and find a rhythm together, it soon feels surprisingly natural.

Richard is right about a dog improving your pace. With an outside force pulling you forward in mid-air, it feels as if each stride is a few inches longer and faster than when running alone. You certainly

feel that you've had a good workout.

While many dogs are trained *not* to pull on their leads when out walking, many soon learn the difference between the lead and a harness and when to pull and when not. Richard estimates that most dogs need around two months of training. The results are plain to see with Alexi reacting to commands of "left", "right", "slow down" and "stop". She also ignores distractions such as cyclists, pedestrians and other dogs.

It's easy to see why so many people are attracted to Canix events. Even a short

run gives you a tremendous bond with your four-legged running mate which is why it attracts so many rescue dogs as well as guide dogs and hearing dogs for the deaf.

"The beauty of Canix is that it's open to anyone," says Eileen. "Runners can choose their distance. Often once they've run in a Canix race, they're hooked."

After my brief run, I'm raring to go again. Alexi however, staring at me panting and sweating in front of her, isn't quite so convinced.

● **For more information on Cani-Cross see** [canix.co.uk](http://canix.co.uk)

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