

Ursodiol (URSO, Actigall)

What is ursodiol? Ursodiol is one of the naturally occurring bile salts. Bile salts are made in the liver and flow down the bile ducts to the intestine where they are needed to help digest the fats in the food we eat. There are a number of bile salts, some of which are toxic when retained in the liver. Ursodiol has low liver toxicity. When taken as a medication, it replaces some of the more toxic liver bile salts. Therefore, if bile is retained in the liver for some reason, there is less liver damage. The two main types of liver damage caused by bile salts being retained in the liver are primary biliary cirrhosis and primary sclerosing cholangitis.

What is it used for? Ursodiol is approved by the FDA for the following:

- Treatment of primary biliary cirrhosis (PBC) --- People with PBC seem to live longer and do not come to a liver transplant as soon as those who do not use it.
- Dissolving cholesterol gallstones (rarely used anymore)
- Preventing gallstone formation during rapid weight loss (rarely used anymore)

It is also used by physicians in the treatment of primary sclerosing cholangitis and other chronic disorders of the liver. Since one of the side effects is diarrhea, it occasionally is even used to treat difficult constipation.

How do I take it? Follow your physician's instructions carefully. You may take it on an empty stomach or with food to prevent stomach upset. Keep all medications away from children. Never share your medications with anyone else.

What do I do for a missed dose? If you miss a dose of this medicine, take it as soon as possible. If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and return to your regular schedule. Do not double up on this medication.

Are there interactions with food or beverages? None known.

Are there interactions with other drugs? An interaction generally means that one drug may increase or decrease the effect of another drug. Also, the more medications a person takes, the more likely there will be a drug interaction. Interaction with this drug may occur with the following :

- antacids that contain aluminum (Alucaps, Roloids)
- cholesterol lowering medications (Lopid, Mevacor, Questran)
- estrogens (Premarin)
- birth control pills

Is there a problem if I have another disorder or disease? At times, a drug may have a different or enhanced effect when other diseases are present. This drug has not been found to interact adversely with any other disease.

What about allergies? People who have known allergies or asthma may be at an increased risk for a reaction from any new medication. Signs of an allergic reaction are skin rash, hives or itching. Of course, a person should not take ursodiol if there has been a previous reaction to this or a similar drug.

What if I'm pregnant, considering pregnancy or breast-feeding? Any drug taken during pregnancy is potentially dangerous to a fetus. The FDA has a grading system for each drug which reflects what is known medically. Ursodiol is ranked B. This means it is not expected to be harmful to an unborn baby. It is not known if Ursodiol passes into breast milk. Always consult the physician before taking any drug during or when planning pregnancy or during breast feeding.

What are the effects on sexual function? None known.

Are there other precautions? It may take several weeks to months to see the full effect of this drug. Do not stop taking this medicine without checking with your doctor.

How long is it safe to take ursodiol? The safety of using ursodiol beyond 24 months is not established. However, since it is a naturally occurring bile salt, it is likely safe to use it long-term. It is gastroenterologists' experience that patients can safely stay on this drug for long periods.

How about side effects? Adverse reactions can occur with any drug, even over-the-counter medications. Some of these are mild such as a stomach upset, which may be avoided by taking the medication with food. Minor reactions may go away on their own but if they persist, contact the physician. For major reactions, the patient should contact the physician immediately. For ursodiol, the following are the observed side effects:

Minor:

Diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, gas, metallic taste, constipation, rash, headache, muscle aches

Major:

Severe itching, severe muscle or joint pain, persistent cough