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# Breakthrough treatment for rheumatics

By **Christine Fieldhouse**

A COMMON arthritis drug has been found to be an effective treatment for rare debilitating rheumatic conditions, new research reveals.

The drug would replace steroid medication for Giant Cell Arteritis (GCA) and linked condition Polymyalgia Rheumatica (PMR), treatments which often have severe side

effects, such as diabetes, osteoporosis and weight gain.

An international trial of the drug tocilizumab found that more than half of patients with GCA were able to come off steroids after 12 months.

GCA, also called temporal

arteritis, causes inflammation in the medium and large arteries, often around the head and neck.

The most common symptoms are aches in and around the temples and neck, vision loss and pain in the jaw muscles.

If untreated, GCA can cause blindness and cardiovascular disease. About half of sufferers also develop PMR, where the

muscles and sometimes joints become inflamed, causing stiffness, pain and tenderness in the shoulders, hips and back.

The new trial of more than 250 patients in 14 countries, including the UK, found that 56 per cent achieved steroid-free remission after a year on tocilizumab.

'This is exciting news and a major breakthrough,' said

Professor Bhaskar Dasgupta, consultant rheumatologist at Southend University Hospital in Essex, who specialises in GCA and PMR. He added: 'It will hopefully mean patients won't have to take long-term steroids.'

Prof Dasgupta expects tocilizumab to be licensed for the treatment of GCA within the next year.