

STEROIDS

Steroids (glucocorticoids) are usually prescribed initially to reduce blistering and inflammation. There is little else that possesses the fast acting and positive impact these can have when you are in pain from your blisters. But they come with very serious negative effects.

They can be delivered in a topical form (creams or lotions to apply to the skin or liquid drops or sprays or foam applied into the eyes, nose or mouth, etc), or in a “systemic” form, i.e. taken as tablets or intravenously. They are also a delivered via inhaler.

In the UK, the corticosteroids used by mouth are usually called “prednisolone”, and the various creams used have different names, but these vary on the basis of their strength.

They are a double-edged sword though. They can deliver pretty immediate relief when symptoms are at their worst, but, because of the very significant side effects, both short and long, Clinicians try to find alternative drugs called steroid sparing agents, to reduce the need for the steroids.

Steroids (glucosteroids or corticosteroids) are substances like those produced in the adrenal gland and often mimic the effects of adrenaline.

If you are on systemic steroids, you should be given a card to carry which tells anyone treating you that you are on them.

It can help to minimise the side effects by taking your tablets in the morning. You should also eat well and exercise. Some other medicines and foods (such as liquorice) should be avoided.

Do not use steroid creams on the face and ensure you use sparingly and apply with hands in latex gloves.

If you use steroid mouth washes, these are likely to cause oral thrush and it's a good idea to rinse out your mouth with a mouth wash a short while after to prevent this.

Because your immune system is reduced, you will be at risk of other diseases and avoid others with infections. You should also ensure that

you have any non-live vaccine offered, including the annual influenza jab. But avoid any “live” vaccines – check with the nurse or doctor.

Side Effects

Lowered immunity
Sleeping problems.
Bloating or weight gain
Moon face (Cushing’s syndrome)
Mania
Depression
Loss of calcium from the bones
Blood pressure (hypertension)
Acid reflux and digestive problems
Diabetes
Eye problems such as glaucoma or cataracts
Thinning skin
Thinning hair

on steroids for any period of time, then you will need to reduce **very** slowly. These may include:-

Low blood pressure (hypotension)
Aching limbs
Low energy
Low blood potassium
Mood changes
Gastric problems
Etc

We strongly recommend that you do not underestimate the effects of steroids in whatever form. Take some time to read more about them, understand how they work and what their risks and benefits are.

They can save your life but not without cost.

If you have been given a large dose of prednisolone and/or have been on steroids for any period of time, it is very important that you reduce the dose slowly rather than stopping them abruptly. Your doctor should give you very clear instructions on how to taper the dose and usually will advise you to do this more slowly the smaller the dose of prednisolone you are taking (this is because you need to consider the relative percentage reduction rather than the absolute reduction in milligrams).

As you taper the steroid dose, you may experience a recurrence of your symptoms. Your doctor will advise you not to continue tapering the dose if this happens and may advise you to increase the dose of steroid to the previous dose that controlled your symptoms.

Once you get to a very low dose, you may find that alternating days of your normal low dose and no dose can help ease you towards complete withdrawal from the steroids.

It takes time for your adrenal glands which make natural steroids such as cortisol inside your body to recover their full function and if you stop taking your oral steroids abruptly without gradually reducing their dose, you can become very unwell due to an acute lack of steroids. Symptoms of adrenal insufficiency include:

- Low blood pressure (hypotension)
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Muscle weakness and fatigue
- Low energy
- Low blood potassium
- Mood changes

These symptoms may exist for some time after you have completely stopped taking steroids.

During periods of increased stress e.g. severe infection, trauma, surgery, you will likely need to take an increased dose of oral steroid to avoid developing adrenal insufficiency. It is very important that all healthcare providers know you are taking oral steroids so they can give you appropriate advice in these situations.

We strongly recommend that you do not underestimate the effects of steroids in whatever form. Take some time to read more about them, understand how they work and what their risks and benefits are.