

Steroid Tablets

Steroids help in many illnesses. However, some people who take steroids develop side effects. This leaflet discusses the main possible side effects, and gives other useful information if you take steroids.

Why are steroid tablets used?

Steroid tablets (cortisone or corticosteroids) work mainly by reducing inflammation. They are used for a variety of conditions where inflammation occurs. For example: some autoimmune diseases; some types of muscle, skin, and joint diseases; asthma; etc. Steroids are also used to treat some cancers. Prednisolone is the common steroid tablet. The outlook (prognosis) for a number of diseases has improved, sometimes dramatically, since steroids became available.

Some general points about steroid tablets

- Short courses of steroids usually cause no side effects. For example, a 1-2 week course is often prescribed to ease a bad attack of asthma. This is usually taken without any problems.
- Side effects are more likely to occur if you take a long course of steroids (more than 2-3 months), or if you take short courses repeatedly.
- The higher the dose, the greater the risk of side effects. This is why the lowest possible dose, which controls symptoms, is aimed for if you need steroids long-term. Some diseases need a higher dose to control symptoms than others. Even for the same disease, the dose needed often varies from person to person.
- A common treatment plan is to start with a high dose to control symptoms. Often the dose is then slowly reduced to a lower daily dose that keeps symptoms away. The length of treatment can vary depending on the disease. Sometimes the steroid treatment is gradually stopped if the condition improves. However, steroids are needed for life for some conditions as symptoms return if the steroids are stopped.
- The type of steroids used to treat disease is called corticosteroids. They are different to the 'anabolic' steroids, which some athletes and bodybuilders use illegally. Anabolic steroids have very different effects.

What are the possible side effects of steroids?

For many diseases, the beneficial effects of steroids usually outweigh the side effects. Possible side effects include the following.

- **Osteoporosis** ('thinning of the bones'). However, treatment can help to protect against this if the risk is high. For example, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for women past the menopause, and other medicines, are available to help prevent bone loss.
- **Weight gain.** A 'puffiness' around the face may also develop.
- **Increased chance of infections** as steroids may suppress the immune system. In particular, a severe form of chickenpox is a risk if you have not had chickenpox in the past. Most people have chickenpox as a child and are immune. If you have not had chickenpox, keep away from people with chickenpox or shingles. Tell a doctor if you come in contact with people with these conditions if you have not had chickenpox in the past. Also, tuberculosis (TB) may flare up again if you had it in the past, even many years ago.
- **Increase in blood pressure.** So have your blood pressure checked regularly. It can be treated if it becomes high.
- **High blood sugar** which may mean extra treatment if you have diabetes. Steroids may occasionally cause diabetes to develop.
- **Muscle weakness.**
- **Skin problems** such as poor healing after injuries, thinning skin, and easy bruising. Stretch marks sometimes develop.
- **Mood changes.** Some people actually feel better in themselves when they take steroids. However, steroids may aggravate depression and other mental health problems.
- **Indigestion** and an increased risk of duodenal and stomach ulcers. Tell your doctor if you develop indigestion or stomach pains.

The above are only **possible** side effects, which may affect **some** people on steroids. There is often a balance between the risk of side effects against the symptoms and damage that may result from some diseases if they are not treated.

Some important points about steroid tablets.

- Do not stop steroid tablets suddenly if you have been taking them for more than a few weeks. Forgetting to take the odd tablet probably does no harm. However, serious withdrawal effects can occur once the body is used to the steroids. These may develop within a few days if you stop steroid tablets suddenly. A doctor should supervise any change in dose. Dose reductions are done slowly over a number of weeks.
- Do not take anti-inflammatory painkillers (such as ibuprofen, etc) whilst taking steroids unless advised by a doctor. The two together increase the chance of a stomach or duodenal ulcer developing.
- Most people who take regular steroids carry a 'steroid card' and/or medic-alert bracelet (see below). This details dose, the condition, etc, in case of emergencies. For example, if you were knocked unconscious in an accident, it is important that the doctors know that you take steroids and need to take them regularly.
- The dose of steroid may need to be increased for a short time if you are ill with other

conditions. For example, if you have a serious infection, or have an operation. This is because more steroid is needed during physical stress.

- See a doctor if you have any concerns about your steroid treatment.

Medic-Alert

Some people on long-term steroids like to wear a Medic-Alert emblem, worn as a bracelet or necklace. It is engraved on the back with the member's main medical condition, personal identification number, and 24-hour emergency number.