

PATIENT INFORMATION

Steroids

What are steroids?

Some steroids occur naturally in the human body. Man-made steroids, also known as corticosteroids, act like natural steroids to suppress the immune system and reduce inflammation. They are used in many different autoimmune illnesses (e.g. arthritis, asthma). They are different to anabolic steroids used by bodybuilders and athletes.

What are the risks and possible side effects of taking steroids?

The most common side-effects are:

- Weight gain and/or increase in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping and mood changes- you may feel very high or very low. This change may be more common in people with a previous history of mood disturbance. If you're worried please discuss this with your doctor.
- Increased blood sugar and blood pressure – If you have diabetes, high blood pressure or epilepsy, steroids can sometimes make these worse. Your doctor should check your blood pressure and blood sugar levels from time to time and may adjust your medication if necessary.
- Indigestion, stomach pains
- A round face, stretch marks, thinning of the skin.
- Steroid tablets can make glaucoma worse or cause cataracts with long term use.
- Steroids may also cause muscle weakness or occasionally interfere with the menstrual cycle.
- Taking steroid tablets can make you more likely to develop infections.
- If you feel feverish or unwell, or develop any new symptoms after starting taking steroid tablets it's important to tell your doctor. You should also contact your doctor if you develop chickenpox or shingles or come into contact with someone who has chickenpox or shingles. These can be severe in people on steroids, and you may need antiviral treatment.
- Steroids can cause your bones to weaken, and make fractures more likely; this can lead to a condition known as osteoporosis. Regular exercise (especially weight-bearing) can help to reduce the risk of getting osteoporosis, as can making sure you get enough calcium in your diet (dairy products) and avoiding smoking and drinking too much alcohol.

How should I take steroids?

- Steroids are usually taken after food and in the morning, to try to prevent stomach problems and sleep disturbances. You may also be given a drug to reduce stomach secretions to try and reduce gastric symptoms.
- You should not stop steroids suddenly without speaking to the person treating you first. Follow the medical advice given to you.

- If you are taking high doses of steroids, or if you're on them for more than 3 weeks, you'll need to carry a steroid card. This will have information on your dose and how long you've been taking them for. If you become ill, or involved in an accident, the doctors treating you will know that you've been taking steroids and can carry on your treatment.
- You should avoid live vaccines (e.g. shingles). The vaccine against the most common cause of pneumonia and yearly flu vaccines are safe to have as they are not live vaccines. It is important to have these vaccinations to reduce your chances of getting these infections.
- Do not take over the counter preparations or herbal remedies without discussing first with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.
- If you have any concerns about your treatment or its side-effects you should discuss these with your medical team

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.

Working with you, for you

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