



Steroids Factsheet

TREATMENT WITH STEROIDS

Steroid medicines are often given to people with vasculitis. You may also see steroids referred to as corticosteroids or glucocorticoids. They help to reduce inflammation, damp down the activity of the immune system and relieve symptoms. Examples of symptoms helped by steroids include joint pains, skin sores, eye disease, and nervous system disorders.

Prednisolone is the commonest steroid used. It is a man-made version of hydrocortisone, the steroid produced naturally in the body. Hydrocortisone does not last very long in the body and its effects in reducing inflammation are weak. Artificial steroids last longer, and their anti-inflammatory effects are much stronger. Other types of artificial steroids used are triamcinolone, methylprednisolone and dexamethasone. Steroids can be given in high doses to control symptoms ("remission induction") and in lower doses to prevent further attacks ("remission maintenance"). They are often combined with other medicines – immunosuppressant drugs – to achieve these aims.

Vasculitis can often be treated but rarely cured. This means people have to take medicines for a long period of time. Many people can stop them after one or two years but the duration is very variable, and some people have to be on them for much longer.

Most people with vasculitis will be given steroids in tablet form but other forms are occasionally required. For example, if high doses need to be given quickly, they can be administered through a drip into a vein. Gels, pastes and creams are sometimes used for ulcers in the mouth and on the genitals.

Although steroids are effective at controlling the symptoms and preventing the complications of vasculitis, they do have side effects. Not everyone who takes steroids gets side effects, but the risk of developing side effects is increased if the medicine is taken for long periods of time and at high doses.

In the short term, steroids can cause indigestion, sickness, sleep disturbance, change in mood and dizziness.

In the medium to long term, side effects can include:

- Weight gain – most people get some weight gain if on steroids for any length of time. The amount varies from person to person. Some people notice fat developing around the face, at the back of the neck (causing a 'buffalo hump' or on the stomach).
- Diabetes – steroids can increase the blood sugar to diabetic levels. This is called 'steroid-induced' diabetes. It usually settles down when the dose is lowered or the treatment is stopped. However, in some people, the diabetes can require lifelong treatment. This can happen particularly in people with additional risk factors such as obesity or a family history of diabetes.