

CORTICOSTEROIDS (Prednisone)

What are Corticosteroids and how do they work?

Corticosteroids, often known as steroids, are an anti-inflammatory medicine used to treat many conditions. They are a man-made version of hormones normally produced by the adrenal glands (two small glands that sit on top of the kidneys).

Although corticosteroids are a steroid hormone, they are not the same as anabolic steroids, which are sometimes abused by athletes and bodybuilders to build muscle and improve performance. Anabolic steroids are man-made versions of male sex hormones and are usually only prescribed to boys with delayed puberty or to men with conditions causing low testosterone.

Corticosteroids are available in different forms, including:

- tablets (oral steroids or *prednisone*)
- injections – which can be into blood vessels, joints or muscles (*such as depomedrol*)
- inhalers – such as mouth or nasal sprays (*such as budeflam*)
- lotions, gels or creams (topical steroids *such as 1% hydrocortisone cream*)

What are corticosteroids used for?

Corticosteroids are mainly used to reduce pain and swelling by dampening down the immune system. In the rheumatology department (especially in the arthritis and lupus clinics), they are used to treat autoimmune conditions, where the immune system, which normally protects the body from infections, mistakenly attacks itself. Examples of autoimmune conditions are: Rheumatoid arthritis SLE (lupus) Dermatomyositis and Polymyositis Systemic sclerosis Gout

What are the side effects?

Corticosteroids will be prescribed at the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time.

There aren't usually severe side effects if you take steroid injections or a short course (1-2 weeks) of steroid tablets. However, if you use corticosteroids treatment can cause problems in some people such as:

- increased appetite – leading to weight gain
- acne
- thinned skin that bruises easily

- increased risk of infections, including TB and pneumonia
- poor sleep
- mood changes, mood swings and depression
- diabetes
- high blood pressure
- osteoporosis (weak and brittle bones) – this is why we give calcium and Vitamin D supplements
- muscle weakness
- withdrawal symptoms when stopped suddenly. Your dose needs to be reduced slowly over a few weeks or months.

Are corticosteroids safe during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

Corticosteroids are generally safe to use during pregnancy. However, they're not usually recommended unless the potential benefits outweigh the risks.

What are some things I need to know or do while I take Corticosteroids?

- Avoid using non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (such as **brufen and voltaren**) together with corticosteroids as you increase your chance of getting stomach ulcers and internal bleeding.
- Avoid using any **live vaccine**, such as the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine

Corticosteroids make it more difficult to control your blood sugar. If you are diabetic, your blood sugar will usually be checked more often and your medication may need to be increased.

- **Please remember that** corticosteroids are not pain tablets. **If you have pain, use paracetamol or Tramadol. Please think carefully before using more prednisone than your doctor prescribes – we are very concerned about side effects!**

How do I get more information?

The SA arthritis foundation is a charity that offers online and telephonic support at <https://www.arthritis.org.za/> and 0214252344.

Talk to your Groote Schuur rheumatology nurse or doctor at your next appointment or on 0214045313 (Thursdays) or 5394(Fridays) during clinic hours.