

Corticosteroids

What Are Corticosteroids?

Corticosteroids are also called steroids. Steroids are a group of medications that are very similar to cortisol. Cortisol is a hormone made by your adrenal glands. When it floods your body, you have what scientists call a fight-or-flight response – the type of response you call upon from your body when you are under stress. Therefore, cortisol is also called the stress hormone. During times of stress, some parts of your immune system may be slowed down.

In autoimmune diseases, slowing down the immune system can help. It decreases the immune system's attack on your body and helps to get rid of inflammation and pain. Therefore, steroids are used to treat people with autoimmune diseases.

Common steroids used to treat people with autoimmune diseases include prednisone, hydrocortisone, methylprednisolone, and triamcinolone.

Corticosteroids should not be confused with anabolic steroids. Anabolic steroids are used by some athletes to build bigger muscles. Corticosteroids are used by rheumatologists to lower inflammation. Corticosteroids are taken for many rheumatic diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, polymyositis, and vasculitis.

What Are the Side Effects?

Steroids are very similar to the stress hormone cortisol, which affects all parts of your body. Therefore, taking steroids can have many side effects, and depending on the dose and the patient, some may be serious. In contrast to other medications, almost everyone taking steroids may experience some side effects. Fortunately most of these tend to be relatively mild. Side effects can involve many parts of your body. Common side effects may include bone loss and osteoporosis, blood sugar problems, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, easy bruising, infections, cataracts, insomnia, weight gain, increased appetite and mood swings. The likelihood of developing a side effect is proportionate to the dose of steroids and how long patients take steroids.

How Do I Stay Safe with Steroids?

Here are other important rules to follow when you take steroids:

- **Take steroids *exactly* as they are prescribed!**
Do not increase or decrease the dose, except if your doctor says that it's okay.
Never just stop your medication!
- **Come in for regular checkups while taking steroids!**
It's important to catch side effects early on.

- **Tell your rheumatologist about any changes in your health!**
New health problems may be caused by steroids and may need to be treated.
- **Tell all the doctors you see that you are taking steroids!**
For 2 years after your treatment, tell all your doctors that you took steroids!
- **When you become ill, while on steroids, the dose of steroids may need to be increased.** Make sure all doctors treating you know you are on steroids. Make sure all your doctors know when you start steroids, and when the doses are changed.