



STEROIDS AND CANCER TREATMENT

An information sheet for patients, families and whānau

WHAT ARE STEROIDS?

Steroids are substances that are naturally produced by our bodies. They help control many bodily functions including blood pressure, inflammation, metabolism and immune responses.

Man-made (synthetic) versions of steroids are commonly used as medications, including for treatment of blood cancers and blood conditions. These are usually a type of steroid called corticosteroids, which are similar to steroids produced by the adrenal glands.

The most common steroids used in cancer treatment are:

- Dexamethasone
- Prednisone
- Methylprednisolone
- Hydrocortisone.

What do steroids do?

Steroids can perform many different functions. They may be prescribed alongside other cancer treatments, or on their own.

They can:

- Kill cancer cells
- Enhance the effects of other anticancer treatments
- Reduce inflammation
- Help prevent allergic reactions (e.g. to a chemotherapy drug)
- Reduce your body's immune response (e.g. after a stem cell transplant)
- Improve your appetite
- Reduce nausea and vomiting after cancer treatment.

How are steroids taken?

The way steroids are taken depends on the type of steroid and the intended effect. They can be taken orally (by mouth), as an injection (into the muscle, under the skin or into a vein), or as a cream, inhaler or eye drops. The most common ways to take steroids during cancer treatment are orally (as tablets or liquid) or via a vein (IV).

Side effects

Steroids can cause side effects while they are being taken. They are usually temporary and should resolve once steroids are stopped. The type and severity of side effects can be different for every person. The side effects that you experience may also be affected by any other treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) you are having at the same time.

Some of the most common side effects are listed in the table on the next page. You may experience some of them, but you are unlikely to have all of them. There are also other less common side effects not listed here. Speak to your medical team if you are concerned about your side effects, as the dose or timing of your steroids may be able to be adjusted.

If you would like to get in touch:

Call: 0800 15 10 15

Email: info@leukaemia.org.nz

Visit: www.leukaemia.org.nz

Mail: PO Box 99182, Newmarket, Auckland 1149
Or visit one of our Support Services offices in Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch or Dunedin

Side effects	Tips for managing
Stomach pain (e.g. indigestion, heart burn)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell your medical team – they can prescribe medication to help • Take oral steroids with food or milk.
Raised blood sugar levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor blood sugars closely if you have diabetes • Be aware of symptoms of high blood sugars – thirst, frequent urination (weeing) and tiredness. Contact your medical team if you have them.
Increased risk of infection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High doses or extended use of steroids can suppress the immune system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid people who are unwell (especially with Covid-19, chicken pox, shingles) • Avoid crowds • Wash hands after using the toilet and before eating • Contact your medical team if you have signs of an infection – fever, sore throat, cough, body aches, etc.
Mood changes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety or restlessness • Mood swings • Low mood or depression • Irritability • Difficulty concentrating • Confusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell your medical team of any personal or family history of mental health concerns • If your side effects are causing you problems, discuss a change in steroid regimen with your medical team.
Increased appetite and weight gain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This may be a helpful side effect if your appetite was previously low • Speak to your medical team if you are concerned about your weight changing • Have small, healthy snacks between meals.
Fluid retention <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swollen feet, legs or abdomen (belly) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevate (raise) legs when resting (e.g. using a footstool) • Do regular physical activity • May require medication (diuretics) if very severe – speak to your medical team.
Difficulty sleeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take steroids earlier in the day to minimise sleep disturbance • If there is a delay between taking steroids and feeling their effects, take steroids before bed • Try to sleep and wake up at the same time each day • Avoid screens before bed • Do some light exercise each day.
Eye/vision changes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurred vision • Clouding • Eye infections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your medical team know immediately if you have eye problems or changes to your vision.
Changes to skin, hair or face <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More body hair • Thinner hair on head • Skin rash or redness • Bruising • Acne (pimples) • Puffy or swollen face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to your medical team – these side effects can often be improved by reducing the dose of steroids.
Muscle weakness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue regular physical exercise • See a physiotherapist for exercise guidance if needed • Let your medical team know.
Fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure you are eating and drinking enough • Rest regularly • Continue regular gentle exercise.



Important information

Stopping steroid treatment

Take your steroids exactly as your medical team tell you to. Taking high doses of steroids stops your body from making its own supply. Stopping your steroids suddenly can cause:

- Cold, clammy or pale skin
- Sweating
- Dizziness
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting
- Diarrhoea (loose bowel motions or poos).

If you have been taking steroids continuously for more than three weeks, do not stop taking steroids suddenly. Reduce the amount you are having gradually, under the guidance of a doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Drug interactions

Steroids can interact with other medications, herbal products, vitamins, and some food and drinks. Even natural products can interact with medications. Always tell your medical team about any medicines or products you are taking – either prescribed or over the counter. Let them know about any allergies or medical conditions you have too.



More information available online

For more information and to download other fact sheets, see our website www.leukaemia.org.nz

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