

High dose inhaled steroids for people with lung disease



Information for patients Respiratory Medicine

This information is being given together with a new steroid card. We ask everyone given a card to carry it with them. This sheet tells you a bit more about why we are giving the card, and what you can do to help keep yourself safe when you're ill.

This sheet is for people who are taking steroids in their inhalers, but are not regularly taking steroid tablets.

What are steroid treatments for lung disease?

Steroids are drugs that reduce irritation in the lung. They are used in many lung illnesses. For asthma and COPD, they can reduce the number of attacks people get and improve daily symptoms. In other lung diseases, they can reduce scarring of the lung. Steroids are given in two main ways. Inhaled steroids go directly to the lung and work well for asthma and COPD, and are sometimes used for other conditions. When bigger doses are needed, we use steroid tablets. If you are on steroid tablets all the time, you should be given a different information sheet specifically to explain how to manage these tablets.

Steroids are very important medicines to help the lung heal and stop dangerous attacks of breathlessness. You should never stop them without discussing this with your doctor. We know that steroids can have some side effects. Because of this, doctors always try to keep the steroid doses to the smallest dose needed. If you have any concerns about your steroid doses, discuss these with your doctors.

Why have I been given a new steroid card?

Steroids help our body cope with stress. Our bodies naturally make some steroid hormones every day from glands called our adrenal glands. Our bodies make more steroid when we are ill. Sometimes if people are taking steroids as medicines, the body stops making enough of its own steroid because it sees that steroids are already in the body. This means that someone on steroids may not make enough extra steroid of their own if they have another serious illness. In the worst cases, people can become seriously ill with what is called an 'adrenal crisis'. The NHS wants to warn everyone who is on steroids about this, and give them information about what to do when they are ill.

Adrenal crisis is rare in people who are only taking inhaled steroids, but it can happen.



What are the signs of adrenal crisis and when might it happen?

Adrenal crisis can happen if you suddenly stop taking steroid treatments, or if you are on steroid treatment and get another illness. Signs of crisis can include severe dizziness with serious vomiting and/or diarrhoea. People having an adrenal crisis may have sudden confusion, tiredness, or headache.

How can I prevent adrenal crisis?

You can prevent this from happening by being careful not to forget your treatment. You may also need to take extra steroids if you are unwell. Your doctor may give you a personal plan just for you, but a typical emergency plan looks like this. Doctors often call this plan your 'sick day rules'. If you need an operation you should also tell your surgeon and their anaesthetist that you are on steroids.

Sick day rules if you are on high dose inhaled steroids

Some people who take quite high doses of inhaled steroids may have a small risk of an adrenal crisis. Your doctor may give you a personal plan just for you, but a typical emergency plan looks like this:

- **If you have a mild to moderate illness with fever like a cold**, then you do not need to change your treatment, unless your underlying illness (e.g. asthma) is getting worse.
- **If you have a more nasty illness with a bad fever or with some mild diarrhoea and vomiting**, but you are able to drink and keep these fluids down, then you do not need to change your treatment. You should rest and be prepared to action if you get worse. If you're not improving after a day or so call your GP or 111. Ring 111 or 999 if you deteriorate.
- **If you have severe diarrhoea or vomiting and are unable to keep fluids down, or you have new dizziness, confusion or drowsiness, you may have adrenal crisis.** This is a medical emergency. You must urgently telephone 999, as described in your steroid warning card.
- If you have steroid tablets in hand and sometimes increase your steroid treatment for other reasons, such as bad asthma, then follow any personal action plans you have if your underlying illness is worse.



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