

## Information for Patients

# Treatment with Prednisolone

### What is Prednisolone?

Prednisolone is a steroid tablet. Steroids are man-made version of chemicals known as hormones which are naturally made in the body. Prednisolone mimics a type of hormone known as corticosteroids (different to anabolic steroids used by bodybuilders). Corticosteroids help to reduce inflammation, and so medicines like prednisolone are used to control inflammation seen in rheumatoid arthritis and in conditions of the eye such as uveitis.

### Why do I need steroids?

Normally, inflammation is the body's natural reaction to fight infection and repair or heal from damage to the body. To do this, your immune system produces extra fluid, causing swelling, redness and heat in the affected area. You might have noticed this if you have had a cut or wound on your skin. However, in conditions like rheumatoid arthritis and uveitis, the body fights itself and cannot control the inflammation that occurs. If left untreated, this can cause permanent damage; in the eye, it can cause loss of vision. Therefore, steroids are used to reduce inflammation and will ease symptoms such as swelling, pain and stiffness.

Inflammation can occur anywhere in and around the eye. For some people, it can be part of a disease that affects other areas of their body. Sometimes, inflammation cannot be calmed down by eye drops alone. Therefore, prednisolone tablets are needed to provide adequate treatment and relief.

Depending on the cause of the inflammation in your eye, you will receive specific instructions on the strength of the steroid medication (dose) and how long you will need to take it (duration). For some, this might mean taking the steroid for a short time. Others might need a longer duration of treatment and will then need to gradually taper down their medication over a few weeks. You will be advised how to do this.

## Important

It is very important not to stop treatment by yourself if you have been on this for more than a few days as you may experience withdrawal symptoms. When you take steroid medication, your body stops producing the hormone naturally and cannot quickly start making it when you need it. Therefore, if you become ill, have an accident or need an operation, your body cannot produce enough steroids to make you better and so, you can become very unwell.

Some symptoms to look out for are listed below:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stomach pain
- Dizziness
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Confusion
- Feeling like you might faint

It is important to seek medical attention if you experience these symptoms.

## What to do when starting Prednisolone:

### ➤ Carry a Steroid Card

If prednisolone is prescribed for you, it is important that you carry a steroid card with you at all times. This will be a blue steroid card and/or a red steroid emergency card. These cards will have information on the dose and duration of your steroid medication. It is very important that you take exactly the dose prescribed, and do not stop taking the treatment suddenly. Make sure any change to your dose of steroid is updated on the card.

Steroid treatment can stop the body producing natural hormones, which is dangerous if you get ill, have an accident, or need an operation. Keeping the card with you will help any other doctor who treats you to manage your care correctly.

### ➤ Taking your steroid medication

Your doctor will inform you on how to take your medication. Here are some top tips to remember:

- Take your medication in the morning, as it can cause problems with sleeping
- Take your tablets either with or after food to prevent stomach problems.

## What are the side-effects of steroid medication?

You can experience side-effects when taking prednisolone tablets. It is important that you understand these and know how to control them. Your medical team will also make sure to use the lowest dose required to prevent side-effects, as well as to fully treat your condition.

These potential problems are:

- **Increased risk of infection:** You are more likely to catch in an infection. If you become feverish or unwell, it is important to discuss this with your doctor or specialist nurse.
- **Some diseases:** can be more severe in people who require steroid medication. They might need additional treatment to get better. The important ones to look out for are:
  - Chickenpox
  - Measles
  - Tuberculosis (TB)
  - Herpes simplex infection

See your family doctor if you develop any of these or come in contact with someone who has any of these.

- **Psychological changes:** Treatment with steroids may cause changes in your mood – you may feel very high or very low. It will help to tell someone, who knows you well, that you are taking steroid medication. They can help notice if your mood or behaviour changes without you realising. Rarely, steroid treatments can cause steroid induced psychosis.
- **Stomach irritation:** Prednisolone can irritate the stomach and cause indigestion. You may be prescribed a capsule or tablet to control this. It is important to tell the doctor if you have ever had an ulcer in the past. Some medicines, including aspirin and ibuprofen (which are contained in various headache remedies) can cause stomach irritation or ulcers. Do not use these with prednisolone except on the advice of your doctor.
- **Sleep Disturbance**
- **Weight:** Steroid medication can make it easier to gain weight. It can also affect how fat is distributed in your body. You might notice gaining weight in your torso and hips. It is very important for you to try and keep your weight under control from the very

beginning of treatment. Your doctor can help you with this, in addition to the recommendations in the next section of this leaflet.

- **Diabetes:** Occasionally patients using prednisolone develop signs of diabetes, or those who are diabetic already may find their diabetes more difficult to control. Your blood will be tested to check for this problem.
- **High blood pressure:** You might develop high blood pressure or, if you already have high blood pressure, it can be harder to control it. Your doctor will check your blood pressure regularly and help you bring it to a healthy state.
- **Osteoporosis:** It might be more likely for you to have a fracture.
- **Eye problems:** Over time, steroid medication can affect the eye negatively. Your doctor or optician will check you regularly for any signs of these:
  - Glaucoma - Prednisolone may cause the pressure inside the eye to rise, which over a long period of time can cause damage to the vision.
  - Cataract - Prednisolone can cause changes to the lens in your eye, which can make your vision blurry.
- **Changes to skin, muscle and body shape:** If you require steroid medication over a long period of time, you may notice some thinning of your skin, some weakness in your muscles, and your face becoming rounder. This should become better once your treatment has completed.
- **Healing:** Steroids may affect the way your body heals in response to a wound or surgery. If you have a cut, it may take longer than before for it to heal. If the wound is not healing, you will need to seek advice from your GP or at the hospital.

## What can I do to stay on top of my health?

- **Osteoporosis:** Eating calcium rich foods such as dairy products like milk, yoghurt, and cheese, and vegetables like spinach and broccoli will help keep your bones strong and healthy. You may need additional tests to assess your risk of getting a fracture if you fall. If needed, your doctor will prescribe you additional calcium supplements and bone protecting medication.
- **Diet and exercise:** Exercising regularly and making sensible food choices will help you stay in control of your weight. Exercising will also help to keep the bones strong. Avoiding high salt and high sugar foods will help prevent diabetes and high blood pressure, as well as controlling your weight. If you do gain a lot of weight, it may be difficult to lose it later.

- **Herbal supplements and teas:** Although herbal products are natural products, they can have an impact on your body. Sometimes that impact affects medications you are taking. Do not eat liquorice while taking prednisolone, as this can increase the amount of steroid in your body. Similarly, teas or supplements containing Echinacea, Ginseng, Cat's claw, and Astragalus may also change the effect of your steroid treatment. It is best to seek advice from your doctor or a pharmacist before you start taking any new supplements or teas.
- **Smoking Cessation:** Smoking makes osteoporosis worse and can prevent normal healing. It is important that you stop smoking. Your doctor or pharmacist can provide many options to help you with this.
- **Alcohol:** Alcohol can make stomach problems worse. It can also prevent your body from normally making steroid hormones. Therefore, it is important to stay within 14 units of alcohol per week, and to spread these units out rather than having them in one go. Having alcohol free days helps to prevent stomach problems.
- **Taking other medications:** Always speak to your doctor before starting any new medications or over the counter remedies.
- **Fertility, pregnancy, and breastfeeding:** Let your doctor know when you are planning to start a family or if you become pregnant while having steroid treatment. Do not stop taking this treatment before you have spoken to your doctor. It's important that a mother stays healthy during pregnancy and that flare-ups are avoided.

Some steroid tablets, including prednisolone, can be taken during pregnancy. They're often used to treat flare-ups in women who are pregnant. Studies have not shown that steroid medication can harm the developing baby, however, to stay on the safe side, the dose and duration of your medication may need to be adjusted. You will also need to be checked for side effects regularly during your pregnancy.

Steroids can pass from your body into breast milk. However, it is not known to affect your baby. If you take or frequently need strong steroid medication, it is recommended to breastfeed 4 hours after taking the medication. Your baby may also need to be checked by the doctor for any side effects of steroid medication.

- **Vaccinations:** It can be harmful for you to receive certain vaccines. These are a type of vaccine known as "live" vaccines. Current live vaccines offered in the UK are:
  - Live influenza vaccine (Fluenz Tetra)
  - Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccine (Priorix, MMRVaxPro)
  - Rotavirus vaccine (Rotarix)
  - Shingles vaccine (Zostavax)

- BCG vaccine
- Oral typhoid vaccine (Ty21a)
- Varicella vaccine (Varilrix, Varilvax)
- Yellow Fever vaccine

If you require a live vaccine, your doctor will advise you regarding the risks and benefits, or any changes required to your steroid medication to accommodate the vaccine. It is recommended that your close contacts who can receive vaccinations and take boosters, such as those of the flu and measles vaccines, have these as they can help prevent you from getting ill.

You can receive “inactive” versions of the flu vaccine. Always ask your doctor before accepting any vaccinations that are offered to you.

If you require any further information please contact your family doctor or discuss with your hospital team/specialist nurse.