

Steroids

What are Steroids?

Corticosteroids are hormones found naturally in the body, they are produced by the adrenal glands. Steroids have a number of essential functions in the body that are important for life, they can also be used as a medicine for a range of different conditions.

What are they used for?

The most commonly used steroids are prednisolone and dexamethasone and they can be given as tablets or injections. They can be used to suppress the immune system or as a powerful anti-inflammatory. Steroids can sometimes be effective in slowing the growth of some cancers.

Do they have any side effects?

Steroids do have some commonly seen associated side effects and these must be balanced against the clinical benefits of treatment. Sometimes other medications may need to be used to enable reduction of the steroid dose to help reduce the side effects. Side effects are transient and will stop or reduce when the dose is lowered or treatment stopped.

Commonly seen side effects include:

- Increases in thirst, appetite and consequently urination. You do not need to increase your pet's daily food allowance but water should be available all the time and your pet will need to go outside to urinate more frequently
- Panting
- Muscle weakness – you may notice loss of muscle mass
- Lethargy
- Slow growth of hair and sometimes hair loss
- A pot-bellied appearance

IMPORTANT: Steroids can interact badly with other medications, particularly non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Corticosteroids must never be given with NSAIDs. Please let us know if your pet is receiving any other medications.

It is important to remember that we usually use doses at a relatively high dose initially and this means that side effects are more likely to occur early on. These side effects will reduce and disappear as the dose is lowered.

Dose changes and stopping treatment

As the dose of steroid containing medication is reduced, the body needs time to adjust to this and recommence production of its own steroid. This means that it is important not to stop steroids suddenly and ensure that the dose is tapered slowly. Sudden cessation of steroid medication may lead to a complete deficiency of steroids.

The length of time your pet will need to be on steroids will vary dependent on the disease they are being used to treat. For many conditions, steroids will be a long term and possibly lifelong therapy. Our aim, should long term treatment be necessary, is to find the lowest dose possible that successfully controls your pet's disease whilst avoiding the unwanted side effects. It is sometimes necessary to use other drugs alongside steroids to achieve this.