

Withdrawing oral steroid tablets taken for asthma

Respiratory Medicine

Information for Patients

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Why have I been given this leaflet?

We are lowering the amount of oral steroid tablets (prednisolone) you are going to be taking. This is because your asthma is now better controlled.

This leaflet will help explain how your oral steroid tablet dose will be lowered. It has a list of possible withdrawal symptoms that you will need know about.

It also has advice on what to do if you are unwell. We call these 'sick day rules'.

How do I reduce and stop oral steroids?

If you have been taking oral steroids for more than 3 weeks, do not stop taking them suddenly.

You can have serious withdrawal effects when your body is used to the steroid medication. Withdrawal effects may develop within a few days to weeks of stopping them suddenly. You may become very unwell.

When you have been on oral steroids for more than 3 weeks, any change in dose should be supervised by a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. Withdrawal is usually done slowly over a period of weeks or months.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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To give feedback about this information sheet, contact InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

Why is it important to reduce the dose gradually before completely stopping steroid tablets?

Your body normally makes cortisol (a steroid hormone) naturally. Cortisol is made daily by your adrenal glands. It controls a range of vital processes so your body can function properly. It also helps the body respond to stress. If you become unwell with a serious infection or major injury, your adrenal glands will normally make more cortisol to support your bodily systems during the time you are unwell.

When you take oral steroid tablets for 3 weeks or more, your body may reduce or stop making its own cortisol. If you then stop taking your steroid tablets suddenly, your body does not have enough cortisol. You may get symptoms of low cortisol in your body. **Adrenal insufficiency** is when your adrenal glands are not making enough cortisol.

What symptoms might I have as I start to reduce my dose?

Symptoms of withdrawal from oral steroids (prednisolone) due to adrenal insufficiency are:

- weakness
- tiredness
- aching muscles and joints
- feeling sick (nausea)
- tummy (abdominal) pain
- vomiting or diarrhoea
- low blood pressure (hypotension) which may cause you to feel dizzy

You can get some of these symptoms in the first week after reducing your steroid dose. It can take your body a few days to adjust to the new lower dose. These symptoms can be serious so it is important to get advice from a health care professional if you experience these when reducing your steroid tablets.

How will my steroid tablets be reduced during withdrawal?

Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist, will give you instructions on how to reduce your steroid dose. Your dose will be reduced slowly to a dose similar to that found naturally in your body.

We will take a blood test before your dose is reduced again. It is important for you to tell your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you experience any of the symptoms mentioned above. This will help decide if more tests are needed or if it is safe to lower your dose further.

What instructions do I need to follow for the blood test?

We will take blood tests to measure the level of cortisol in your blood. This will help us manage and guide your oral steroid dose.

- **Please make sure that the blood test is done between 8am and 9am or the result will be invalid.**
- **The day before your blood test**, take your steroid tablets (prednisolone) with food before 8am.
- **On the day of the blood test**, take your steroid (prednisolone) tablets **after** you have had your blood taken.

Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist will then look at the results of your blood test. They will decide on what do next.

What are 'sick day rules'?

The sick day rules tell you how to manage your usual steroid medication if you are unwell. When you become ill, your body should naturally make more steroid hormone (cortisol). When you have been on oral steroid tablets for some time, this may not happen. It is essential to mimic the natural response by increasing your dose of steroid tablets to cover this. Taking a higher dose of steroids for a short period of time whilst you are ill is necessary and is not harmful.

Please remember, if you are unwell with your asthma, follow your personal asthma action plan and take a full course of prednisolone.

The table below has rules for when and how to increase your dose of oral steroid tablets if you are unwell for any other reason, and advice for other specific reasons:

Rule 1	<p>Increase your dose of prednisolone to 10mg daily during:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • periods of illness with fever. • any illness needing bed rest. • any illness needing treatment with antibiotics.
Rule 2	<p>Increase your dose to 10mg daily AND seek urgent medical attention (dial 111 or 999) if you have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • periods of severe illness lasting more than 48 hours. • emergency major surgery or a major injury. • persistent vomiting or diarrhoea for more than 1 day. <p>Always show your NHS emergency steroid alert card.</p>
Rule 3	<p>Please tell your doctor, dentist or midwife about your medication before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • any periods of fasting (absence of food or drink) for a procedure needing general anaesthesia. • any surgery or minor procedure (such as an endoscopy or dental procedure). • childbirth.



How long should I follow this advice once I have stopped oral steroids?

Normal cortisol production in response to stress can take several years to recover, and sometimes never recovers completely. Follow the sick day rules for at least 1 year after stopping prednisolone unless advised otherwise by your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Checking your steroid tablet supply

Make sure you have a supply of oral steroid tablets (prednisolone) at home. Regularly check the expiry date of these tablets.

Travelling abroad

When travelling abroad, you should take a supply of double the amount of steroids you need with you. This is in case you have to increase your dose due to illness. We recommend you carry a letter explaining what medicines you need for your medical condition.

Carrying a steroid alert card

If you are taking steroids in any form for more than 3 weeks, you should carry a steroid alert card at all times. It allows health care staff to know you are taking steroid medication should you need emergency treatment. The alert card is available from pharmacies or ask your nurse or doctor.

You may also wish to purchase a 'MedicAlert' bracelet or necklace:

MedicAlert: Freephone: 0800 581 420 / www.medicalert.org.uk

Contact details

If you have any questions or need advice, please contact the Severe Asthma Team:

Severe Asthma Nurses - Tel: 0116 258 3257 / Email: severeasthmaservice@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

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