Steroids

arthritis-uk.org

Steroids can be used to treat a number of conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and gout

Arthritis UK

We are Arthritis UK

We're the 10 million adults, young people and children living with arthritis. We're the carers, researchers and healthcare professionals. The families and the friends. All united by one powerful vision: a future free from arthritis. So that one day, no one will have to live with the physical, emotional and practical challenges that arthritis brings.

There are many different types of arthritis. And we understand that every day is different. What's more, what works for one person may not help another. That's why our trusted information blends the latest research and expert advice with a range of lived experiences. In this way, we aim to give you everything you need to know about your condition, the treatments available and the many options you can try, so that you can make better-informed choices to suit your needs.

We're always happy to hear from you whether it's with feedback on our information, to share your story, or just to find out more about the work of Arthritis UK. **Contact us at healthinfo@arthritis-uk.org**

Contents

Introduction	4
What are steroids and how are they used?	4
How do I take steroids?	8
Side effects and risks	9
Taking other medicines	13
Carrying a steroid card	14
Alcohol	15
Fertility, pregnancy and breastfeeding	16
Discover our support services	17
Thank you	18
Support our work	19

Introduction

Steroids are medicines that can help prevent your condition causing damage to your body. You can discuss the benefits and risks of taking steroids with your healthcare team before you start treatment, so you're able to make an informed decision.

What are steroids and how are they used?

Steroids are an artificial version of chemicals, known as hormones, that are made naturally in the human body. Steroids are designed to act like these hormones to reduce inflammation.

They're also known as corticosteroids and are different to anabolic steroids used by some bodybuilders.

Steroids won't cure your condition, but they're very good at reducing inflammation and will ease symptoms such as swelling, pain and stiffness.

Usually inflammation is the body's natural reaction to infection or injury. Your immune system produces extra fluid to help fight infection and promote healing, which causes swelling, redness and heat in the affected area. You might have noticed this if you've had a cut or wound on your skin.

In some conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis, the immune system produces inflammation in the joints or other parts of the body by mistake, which can cause permanent damage if left untreated. Steroids help reduce this immune reaction.

Steroids can be taken in a number of ways for many types of arthritis and related conditions, as shown in the table opposite.

Steroids are usually only given for a short time to quickly treat flare-ups of your condition. Depending on which condition you have and what dose you're prescribed, you may notice an improvement in your symptoms within a few days.



You can find out more about the conditions mentioned on our website **arthritis-uk.org**

This information covers steroids that can be taken as tablets, liquids, creams, eye drops and ointments.

How is the steroid taken?	What does it do?	What conditions is it used for?	What is a common name for this type?
By mouth – tablets, liquids, dissolvable tablets, also known as oral steroids	Reduces inflammation throughout the whole body.	Rheumatoid arthritis, gout, lupus, other types of inflammatory arthritis or autoimmune conditions	prednisolone betamethasone dexamethasone
By injection – into a joint,muscle, a vein or spinal area	Reduces inflammation in the area of the body where the injection is given	Osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, other types of inflammatory arthritis and some autoimmune conditions	methylpredniso-lone triamcinolone hydrocortisone
By eye – as drops or ointments	Reduces inflammation in the eyes	Uveitis	prednisolone dexamethasone
Applied to the skin as a cream, gel or lotion, also known as topical steroids	Reduces inflammation on the skin	Psoriatic arthritis and psoriasis	hydrocortisone mometasone betamethasone clobetasol

Further information on steroid injections is available at our website **arthritis-uk.org/steroid-injections**



See Arthritis UK booklets **Rheumatoid arthritis; Psoriatic arthritis; Gout; Lupus.** You can view all our information online at **arthritis-uk.org**

Are there any reasons why I won't be prescribed steroids?

You may not be able to start steroids if you have an infection, or if you have any open wounds on your body, as steroids might delay healing or cover up some of your symptoms.

Steroids might affect some medical conditions, such as diabetes, heart or blood pressure problems, or mental health issues. If you have any of these conditions, the person treating you will need to make sure the steroids aren't making the condition worse.

If you have systemic sclerosis, prednisolone can increase the risk of kidney problems at certain doses, so you might not be able to take this type of steroid.

You won't be able to have steroid creams or gels if you have an infection that affects your skin. Some other skin problems, such as rosacea, acne and ulcers, can be made worse by steroid creams so you might not be able to use them if you have any of these conditions.

If you wear contact lenses, you might need to avoid wearing them while using steroid eye drops.

How do I take steroids?

Steroids are taken in different ways and the dose may vary depending on the condition you have. The table below gives an idea of how often you might need to take steroids.

You should always take medication as prescribed by your healthcare team.

Type of steroid	How is it taken?
Tablets, liquids and soluble tablets	• Usually once a day • Preferably in the morning • Either with or after food to prevent stomach problems
Creams and gels	• Usually once or twice a day for a few weeks • Your healthcare team may suggest using them less often but for a longer period • Should be used only on affected areas of the skin
Eye drops and ointments	• May need to be taken regularly throughout the day • Usually, one drop in each eye each time you take it

You will be given the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time, to reduce the risk of side effects. Your dose will probably be reduced gradually as your symptoms improve, or your healthcare team might suggest a different medication.

Don't stop taking steroids without speaking to your healthcare team first.

If you've taken steroid tablets for more than a few weeks and stop them suddenly, this can cause side effects known as withdrawal symptoms. You might be given a small dose, known as a maintenance dose, for a longer period to make sure your symptoms don't return.

Side effects and risks

As with all medicines, some people will have side effects. These are more likely if you're on a high dose or using steroids long-term.

Your healthcare team will aim to keep you on the lowest possible dose to keep your condition under control. You might also be given a drug called a proton pump inhibitor or another medicine to protect your stomach.

Some of the side effects of steroids are shown in the table opposite.

Steroids may sometimes cause mood changes – you may feel very high or very low. This can be more common in people who've had problems with their mood in the past. If you're worried about this, talk to your healthcare team.

Taking steroid tablets in the long-term can make you more likely to get stomach ulcers and infections.

If you feel feverish, tired or unwell, this may mean your body isn't making enough of a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol helps your body handle stress, maintain blood pressure and keep your energy levels steady. If you do feel unwell, it's important to tell your doctor or rheumatology nurse.

Type of steroid	Side effects
Tablets, liquids and soluble tablets	• weight gain and increased appetite • tummy pains, indigestion or heartburn • sleep problems • changes in mood • bruising easily • thinning of the skin • stretch marks • osteoporosis
Creams and gels	• stinging or burning where the cream has been applied • changes in skin colour • thinning of the skin • stretch marks • increased hair growth where the cream has been applied
Eye drops and ointments	• stinging or burning in the eyes after putting drops in • a funny taste in the mouth after putting drops in

Contact your healthcare team straight away if you develop chickenpox, shingles or measles, or if you come into contact with someone who has any of these illnesses. Sometimes these diseases can be severe in people who are taking steroids, and you might need other treatment.

Long-term use of steroids can also cause your muscles to become weaker and may occasionally affect periods in women.

Other complications

Steroid creams and eye drops don't usually cause serious side effects, but if you use them for a long time or at a high dose, the medication could be absorbed into your blood and increase the risk of side effects that normally only occur with steroid tablets. This is usually more common in children.

Steroids can sometimes affect your blood sugar levels and blood pressure. These may be checked regularly, and your healthcare team might change your medicines if needed.

Steroids can also cause high blood sugar or diabetes in people who haven't had either before.

If you have epilepsy, tell your healthcare team before taking steroids because they can sometimes affect your condition.

Steroids can affect the eyes, for example by making glaucoma worse or causing cataracts. They can also cause a problem with your eyes known as serous chorioretinopathy, which happens when fluid collects in part of the eye. If you notice any change in your eyesight, such as your vision becoming blurry, be sure to let your healthcare team know as soon as possible.

Sometimes steroids can cause another condition known as Cushing's syndrome. This can cause thinning of the skin, stretch marks and a rounder face, but it usually clears up once steroids are stopped.

In children and teenagers, steroids can sometimes cause growth to slow down, so they'll need to have their height checked regularly. If growth is slowed, they might be referred to a specialist doctor for advice.

Managing side effects

Because steroids can cause you to put on weight or have an increased appetite, it's important to keep track of your weight while taking them. Making sensible food choices and including some physical activity in your daily routine should help you avoid putting on weight.

Steroids can weaken the bones, which can lead to a condition known as osteoporosis. This condition makes it more likely that you'll break a bone, sometimes after a minor fall or bump.

Your healthcare team may advise you to take medicines called bisphosphonates, or calcium and vitamin D supplements, along with the steroids to help prevent this. Regular exercise, especially weight-bearing activities such as walking, can also help reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

You should also make sure you get enough calcium in your diet. Foods rich in calcium include milk, cheese, bread and green vegetables such as cabbage. You should avoid smoking and drinking too much alcohol.

Taking other medicines

You can usually take steroids along with other medicines. However, some medicines can interact with steroids, so always check with your healthcare team before starting anything new and make sure any healthcare professional treating you knows you're taking steroids.

Avoid starting any over-the-counter preparations or herbal remedies without discussing them first with your doctor, rheumatology nurse or pharmacist.

Some of the following medicines may interact with steroids, so let your healthcare team know if you're taking any of these:

- blood thinners or anticoagulants, such as warfarin
- medicines for epilepsy, such as phenytoin or carbamazepine
- medicines for diabetes
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen
- Xofigo, a drug used to treat prostate cancer
- some antibiotics, such as rifampicin, clarithromycin and erythromycin.

Vaccinations

If you're taking steroid tablets you may need to avoid live vaccines, such as yellow fever vaccine. Sometimes a live vaccine may be necessary, but if this is the case your healthcare team will discuss the possible risks and benefits of the vaccination with you, and it could depend on the dose of steroids you're taking.

If you're using a steroid cream, it's fine to have vaccinations, but you'll need to tell the person giving you the injection to avoid the area being treated with the cream.

The shingles vaccine (Shingrix) is safe to have while taking steroid tablets because it isn't a live vaccine.

The vaccine against the most common cause of pneumonia and yearly flu vaccines can be given safely with steroid tablets, as they're not live vaccines. It's important that you have these vaccinations to reduce your chances of getting these infections.

Having an operation

If you're having an operation or dental procedure, your steroid treatment may need to be changed. Don't stop taking steroids without speaking to your healthcare team first, as in some cases you might be able to carry on taking them, and you may need to have your dose changed before the operation.

The decision will depend on how long you've taken them for, what dose you're on, and where on your body you're having surgery.

Carrying a steroid card

If you're taking high doses of steroids, or if you're using them for more than three weeks, you'll need to carry a steroid card. This will have information on your dose and how long you've been taking them for.

Your doctor, rheumatology nurse or pharmacist should give you a steroid card if you need one. Make sure any change to your dose of steroids is updated on the card.

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

If you have any questions, talk to your healthcare team.

Alcohol

Alcohol and steroid tablets can both upset your stomach. If you have indigestion or other stomach problems after starting steroids, then alcohol is likely to add to the problem, so you may want to cut back on how much alcohol you drink.

UK guidelines recommend drinking no more than 14 units of alcohol a week. You shouldn't save these units to drink all at once, so try to spread your units across the week and have some alcohol-free days.

It's a good idea to cut back on alcohol or avoid it completely, especially if you are having stomach problems.



You can find out more about units of alcohol at **drinkaware.co.uk**

Fertility, pregnancy and breastfeeding

Current guidelines say that some steroid tablets, including prednisolone, can be taken during pregnancy. They're often used to treat flare-ups in women who are pregnant.

If you're planning a family, you should discuss this with your healthcare team, as it's important that you stay healthy during pregnancy and avoid flare-ups. If you get pregnant while you're on steroids, don't stop taking them before you've spoken to your healthcare team.

Small amounts of steroids can pass into breast milk, but there's no evidence that they are harmful to your baby, so guidelines say that people can breastfeed while taking steroid tablets. You should discuss the risks with your healthcare team if you have any concerns.

Steroid creams are safe to use during pregnancy, but if you're breastfeeding you'll need to make sure any cream is wiped off before feeding. Very strong topical steroids are not usually prescribed during pregnancy and breastfeeding.



This booklet is a guide to steroids, their benefits and potential side effects. If there's anything else you'd like to know about steroids, just ask your healthcare team.

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Thank you!

A team of people helped us create this booklet. We would like to thank:

Michalina Ogejo

Craig White

Louise Hynes

We would also like to give a special thank you to Felicity Teague, Sarah Ennis and Patricia Bickerton, who shared their opinions and thoughts. Your feedback makes sure the information we provide is relevant and suitable for everyone.



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Arthritis UK Registered Charity England and Wales No. 207711, Scotland No. SC041156.

April 2026 (Next planned review April 2029).
X2290

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