

STEROID TABLETS “GLUCOCORTICOIDS”

WHAT ARE STEROIDS?

Steroids are naturally-occurring hormones. There are a number of different types, including the sex hormones testosterone and oestrogen, but in the treatment of rheumatic diseases glucocorticoids are used.

Prednisolone is the most commonly-prescribed glucocorticoid – it is essentially a man-made version of the chemical *cortisol* that is found in our bodies.

Many people associate steroids with the drugs that are sometimes used illegally by athletes to improve performance. These are *anabolic* steroids, and are different from glucocorticoids.

WHY ARE THEY USED?

Glucocorticoids are used widely in medicine, and particularly in the treatment of rheumatic disease, because they are powerful anti-inflammatories. They are also immunosuppressant. This makes them effective medications for the treatment of conditions where the body’s immune system has malfunctioned and is causing inflammation.

Glucocorticoids are therefore widely used in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, polymyalgia rheumatica, lupus and vasculitis.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

For many conditions, glucocorticoids work quickly, but the speed of action depends on the dose taken – the higher the dose, the quicker the effect. This may be noticeable within a day or two, or perhaps a week or two with lower doses.

WHEN SHOULD THEY BE TAKEN?

Glucocorticoids should generally be taken in the **morning**, often with food.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS?

As with any medication, glucocorticoids may have side effects. For many of these side effects, the chances of experiencing them are related to the total dose taken over a period of time – the higher the dose, the longer they are taken for, the greater the chances.

Glucocorticoids are usually only given for serious conditions, and it is important to recognize that your doctor would only consider using them if the expected benefits outweigh the risks.

Common side effects include:

- Increased appetite
- Weight gain (especially around the face)
- Thinning of the bones (osteoporosis)
- Thinning of the skin

Emotional changes
Heartburn & indigestion
Stretch marks
Easy bruising

Less common side effects include:

Cataracts
Glaucoma
High blood sugar
High blood pressure
Muscle weakness
Changes in menstrual cycle

Steroids can make you more likely to get infections, so you should tell your doctor if you develop an infection. Sometimes it is necessary to **increase** the dose for a few days.

ARE ANY SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS NECESSARY?

Glucocorticoids should not be stopped suddenly, unless they have only been taken for a week or so. The body starts to shut down its own production of steroids, and this takes time to recover. Steroids should

therefore be weaned down slowly before stopping.

Chickenpox and shingles can be more severe in people taking steroids. It is particularly important to tell your doctor if you have never had chickenpox, and come into contact with someone who has either chickenpox or shingles.

You should discuss with your doctor if you think you may be **pregnant**, want to become pregnant, or are **breastfeeding**.

OTHER DRUGS THAT MAY NEED TO BE TAKEN

It may be necessary to take some additional medications to prevent **osteoporosis**, or **heartburn** associated with the steroids. You should discuss this with your doctor.

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MY PERSONAL STEROID DOSING PLAN

WEEK	DOSE OF PREDNISOLONE
1	mg daily
2	mg daily
3	mg daily
4	mg daily
5	mg daily
6	mg daily
7	mg daily
8	mg daily
9	mg daily
10	mg daily
11	mg daily
12	mg daily
13	mg daily
14	mg daily
15	mg daily
16	mg daily