Dexamethasone
("deks a METH a sone")

How this drug is given: By mouth

Purpose: This drug is an anti-inflammatory drug from the class of steroids called glucocorticoids. They are frequently used to help with the body's response to chemotherapy and to decrease any inflammation that may occur from treatment. Glucocorticoids should not be confused with the anabolic steroids that athletes use to build muscle.

How to take this drug

• Dexamethasone should be taken exactly as prescribed. You should never change your dose of dexamethasone or stop taking this medicine suddenly unless your doctor says you should.

• Tell your doctor before your prescription runs out.

• Take each dose with food or milk to prevent upset stomach.

• Take your doses early in the day to prevent trouble sleeping.

• If you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible. If it is almost time for the next dose, talk to your doctor or pharmacist. You may need to miss a dose or take an extra dose. Do not take double or extra doses.

Storage

• Store this medicine at room temperature, away from heat and moisture. Keep this medicine in its original container and out of the reach of children and pets.

Things that may occur during treatment

1. Stomach irritation can occur, possibly leading to stomach ulcers. To prevent this, take each dose with food, milk or an antacid. Try to limit the consumption of alcoholic beverages while taking this medication.

2. Stomach burning/pain or bloody/black bowel movements should be reported to your doctor or nurse right away.

3. An increased risk of developing an infection is possible. It is very important to tell your doctor if you notice any signs of infection (a sore throat, a cough, pain, burning with urination, or skin sores). A fever may not always be present.
4. Fluid and salt retention in the body can lead to weight gain, swelling in the hands and feet, blurred vision and an elevation in blood pressure. Try to avoid added salt (sodium) in your diet.

5. Your blood sugar can rise if you are taking dexamethasone. This causes excessive thirst and frequent urination. These symptoms must be reported to your nurse or doctor. Blood tests may be done to monitor your blood sugar level. If you have diabetes, your blood and urine will be checked more often.

6. Mood changes or difficulty sleeping may occur. If you have sleeping problems, ask your nurse or physician about changing the times dexamethasone is taken.

7. You will probably be hungrier than usual. Try to eat more fruits and vegetables. Avoid foods high in sugar.

8. If you take dexamethasone over a long period of time you may notice that your face becomes slightly more rounded. Acne may develop from hormonal changes.

9. If you are on any blood-thinning medications such as warfarin or aspirin, dexamethasone may delay wound healing. If you have a cut or scrape, keep the area clean and covered to prevent infection.

10. Long-term use may lead to softening of the bones (osteoporosis) and increased risk of fractures. Increase your intake of calcium, potassium, zinc and vitamin C. See attached sheet for suggestions. Speak with your doctor or dietician about replacing these important minerals.

11. Rarely, long-term use may lead to severe arthritis.

12. Long-term use can cause damage to the lens in the eye, which may lead to cataracts. If you continue on dexamethasone you will need to have your eyes checked on a regular basis.

13. While on dexamethasone, you should not receive immunizations without first speaking with your doctor.

The above information includes some, but not necessarily all, of the possible side effects of this medication. The side effects in this teaching sheet may not be the same ones you experience. Your side effects may be different, depending on how often you receive treatment (your schedule) and how much you receive each time (your dosage). Side effects may also vary if you take other medications. Please talk with your doctor or nurse if you have questions about possible side effects you may experience. This document should not take the place of conversations with members of your health care team.

If you experience any significant change in your health during or after treatment, contact a member of your health care team right away.
Healthy snacks

Your appetite may increase while you are on steroids. To fight the battle of the bulge, try increasing your intake of fruits and vegetables.

- Munch on carrot or celery sticks and any other veggies.
- Crunchy fruits like apples may satisfy the need to snack.
- Try rice cakes or microwave popcorn, instead of high calorie snacks.
- Choose no-salt-added pretzels and crackers.
- Try fresh fruit topped with low-fat yogurt.

Withdrawal symptoms

Under normal conditions, your body produces steroids. Taking prescribed steroids turns off your body’s own production of steroids. Since you are not making enough steroids on your own to keep your body in balance, stopping your medication abruptly may result in low blood pressure, increases in blood potassium, or irregular heartbeats.

Follow your doctor’s instructions about tapering off (slowly decreasing your dose over time) steroids. During steroid taper you may not have any problems or you may notice some effects of withdrawal.

- Soreness or aches in your muscles, joints, and bones.
- Low energy level.
- Cravings for particular foods or a gradual decrease in appetite.
- Stomach aches, or a change in bowel habits.
- Mood swings, or just feeling “low”.
- Low blood pressure, particularly if you have been on blood pressure lowering drugs.

REMEMBER:

- The way you feel is temporary.
- Practice stress management techniques.
- Prepare your family and friends so they can be supportive.
- Contact a dietician for help planning an eating pattern that’s right for you.
Changes to your diet while on steroids

No Concentrated Sweets
Purpose: To avoid binge eating, don’t get started on sweet foods!
• Satisfy your sweet tooth with fresh fruits
• Eliminate regular sodas: try club soda flavored with fruit juice
• Avoid added sugar
• Avoid ice cream, cakes, cookies, muffins and candy

Limit Salt
Purpose: To reduce fluid retention
• Do not add salt when cooking or at the table
• Choose frozen or fresh vegetables instead of canned and salted
• Cut down on processed meats (deli meats)
• Avoid pickles
• Choose low sodium convenience foods, less than 140 mg per serving

Increase Calcium
Purpose: To replace losses
• Choose low fat milk, yogurt
• Choose calcium fortified orange juice
• Eat more broccoli and dark leafy greens
• Try calcium fortified soy milk
• Add almonds, sesame seeds, soybean nuts
• Reduce caffeine intake

Increase Vitamin C
Purpose: To replace losses
• Green and red pepper
• Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, collards
• Kiwi, strawberries, citrus and papaya

Folic Acid
Purpose: To replace losses
• Choose green leafy vegetables, asparagus
• Try sprinkling wheat germ on your cereal
• Drink more orange juice
• Add soy nuts to your diet
• Include lentils and beans in your diet

Increase Protein
Purpose: To reduce breakdown of muscle
• Choose fish, chicken, meat and eggs
• Eat low-fat dairy products
• Try soy food (not soy sauce)
• Choose beans
• Include unsalted nuts in your diet

Replace Saturated and Hydrogenated fats
Purpose: To reduce cholesterol and triglycerides
• Choose a non-hydrogenated spread (e.g., Smart Balance) to replace butter or margarine
• If eaten at all, limit intake of red meat to less than 3 oz daily.
• Use olive oil, or canola, instead of other vegetable oils
• Snack on popcorn, unsalted pretzels, rice cakes, or salt-free crackers
• Limit egg yolks to 2 per week

Increase Potassium
Purpose: To restore losses
• Try banana, avocado, papaya, cantaloupe
• Try spinach, acorn and butternut squash
• Eat more beans: kidney, navy or refried
• Choose sweet potatoes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts
• Add roasted, unsalted nuts to your diet
• Choose low-fat milk and yogurt
• Try dried apricots, raisins, dates

Increase Zinc
Purpose: To replace losses
• Cooked oysters, clams, mussels, lobster, and crab
• Roasted unsalted peanuts, sunflower seeds, cashews
• Wheat germ
• Lentils
• Chicken
• Swiss, gouda, and ricotta cheese