



## Dexamethasone

(“deks-*a*-METH-*a*-sone”)

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**How this drug is given:** By mouth

**Purpose:** This is an anti-inflammatory drug from the class of steroids called glucocorticoids. This drug is used to help the body’s response to chemotherapy and decrease swelling that may occur from some treatments. Glucocorticoids are **not** the same as anabolic steroids that some athletes use to build muscle.

### How to take this drug

- Take dexamethasone *exactly* as prescribed. You should never change your dose or stop taking this medicine suddenly unless directed by your cancer care team.
- Tell your cancer care team before your prescription runs out.
- Take each dose with food and/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 at room temperature, away from heat and moisture.
- Keep this medicine in its original container, out of reach of children and pets.
- If you have unused oral chemotherapy pills (tablets or capsules), please return them to the pharmacy where the prescription was filled. Do not flush them down the toilet, dump in the sink, or throw away in the trash.

### 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 cancer care team right away.

- 3 It is very important to report any signs of infection, such as:**
- Sore throat
  - Cough
  - Pain
  - Burning with urination
  - Skin sores
  - Fever may not always be present on this medicine, so if you have a **fever of 100.5°F (38°C) or higher, call your cancer care team right away.**
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. **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 cancer care team about changing the times dexamethasone is taken.
7. You may feel hungry more often. 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 more rounded. Acne may develop also.
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, leading to cataracts. If you continue on dexamethasone have an eye exam on a regular basis.
13. While on dexamethasone, talk to your cancer care team before receiving immunizations.

*The above information includes some, but not necessarily all, of the possible side effects of this medication. The side effects listed 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 are taking other medications. Please speak with your cancer care team if you have questions about possible side effects*

*you may experience. This document should not take the place of conversations with members of your cancer care team about your treatment and side effects you may experience during and after treatment.*

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

THIS SPACE RESERVED FOR WRITTEN COMMENTS OR NOTES FOR THE PATIENT AND FAMILY:

## Healthy Snacks for a Ferocious Appetite

Your appetite may increase while you are on steroids. To support a healthy weight during treatment, try increasing vegetables and fruits.

- Dip carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, snap peas, celery sticks or other veggies in 2 Tbsp hummus.
- Pack sliced apples and pears with an ounce of low-fat cheese for an on-the-go snack.
- Try 2 rice cakes with 1 Tbsp peanut butter or 3 cups of air popped popcorn.
- Try ½ cup fresh fruit, to sweeten add ½ cup plain Greek yogurt or low-fat cottage cheese.

## Withdrawal Symptoms

Under normal conditions your body produces steroids. Taking prescribed steroids turns off your body's own production of steroids. To keep your body in balance do not stop taking the prescribed steroid abruptly.

Follow your doctor's instructions during steroid tapers. You may notice these symptoms:

- 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 medicines

### REMEMBER:

- This is temporary
- Practice stress management techniques
- Prepare your family and friends so they can be supportive.
- Contact a Dana-Farber dietitian for a plan that's tailored for you.



## Nutrition with Steroids

### Reduce/Remove Concentrated Sweets

- Satisfy your sweet tooth with fresh fruits
- Eliminate sodas: try seltzer flavored with a splash of fruit juice
- Avoid processed and packaged foods such as cookies, candies, crackers, muffins

### Limit Salt

- Do not add salt when cooking or at the table
- Choose frozen or fresh vegetables instead of canned and salted
- Avoid processed meats (deli meats)
- Avoid pickles
- Choose **low sodium** convenience foods, less than 140 mg per serving

### Increase Calcium

- Choose low fat milk, yogurt
- Eat more broccoli and dark leafy greens
- Try calcium fortified unsweetened soy milk
- Add almonds, sesame seeds, soybean nuts
- Reduce caffeine

### Increase Vitamin C

- Green and red peppers
- Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, collards
- Kiwi, strawberries, citrus and papaya

### Folic Acid

- Choose green leafy vegetables, asparagus
- Try sprinkling wheat germ on your cereal
- Add soy nuts to your diet
- Include lentils and beans in your diet

### Increase Protein

- Choose fish, chicken, meat and eggs
- Eat low-fat dairy products
- Try edamame or tofu
- Choose beans
- Include unsalted nuts

### Replace Saturated and Hydrogenated fats

- Choose a non-hydrogenated spread (e.g., Smart Balance, Earth Balance) to replace butter or margarine
- Limit intake of red meat and avoid processed meats
- Use olive oil, or canola, instead of other vegetable oils
- Choose fresh veggies and fruit over packaged snacks and sweets

### Increase Potassium

- Try banana, avocado, papaya, cantaloupe
- Try spinach, acorn and butternut squash
- Eat more beans: kidney, navy or refried
- Choose sweet potatoes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts
- Try roasted, unsalted nuts
- Choose low-fat milk and yogurt
- Try small amounts of dried apricots, raisins, dates

### Increase Zinc

- Cooked oysters, clams, mussels, lobster, and crab
- Roasted unsalted peanuts, sunflower seeds, cashews
- Wheat germ
- Lentils
- Chicken