Information and Advice for Patients Taking Steroids

Throughout their illness many patients are frequently prescribed a type of medication called **STEROIDS**. The word ‘Steroid’ is a collective name for a group of drugs. The two main steroid tablets commonly prescribed by doctors are **Dexamethasone** and **Prednisolone**.

You may be prescribed a short course of tablets lasting 2–3 weeks. Frequently your doctor will reduce these tablets gradually and then prescribe a maintenance dose over a longer period of time.

As with many medications steroids can have some side effects. This leaflet gives advice in how to help minimise any side effects you may experience. If you are concerned in any way about things please do not hesitate to speak to your doctor or nurse.

**Weakness of your muscles**

Weakness of the legs and arms is a problem experienced by many patients who have been on steroids for some time. If you are able, walking is the best exercise for keeping and improving the strength in your legs. However if you are unable to do this, arrangements can be made for you to see a physiotherapist who will suggest alternatives.

**Indigestion or heartburn**

Some patients may have problems with indigestion or heartburn while taking steroids. Antacid tablets are often prescribed in conjunction with steroids to help prevent this. If you suffer from indigestion while taking steroids it is important to tell your doctor.

**Increase in appetite**

While taking steroids you may find that your appetite increases or improves. When you have been unwell this is viewed as a good thing. Additionally experiencing cravings for different foods is not uncommon. Patients regularly desire sweet foods even if they have not had a sweet tooth in the past. Sometimes steroids can cause problems with high levels of sugar in your blood. It is therefore important to try and eat a balanced diet.

**Thirst and frequently passing water**

As already mentioned, steroids can increase the level of sugar in your blood. High sugar levels can cause you to feel very thirsty. It can also make you pass water more often. If you are experiencing these symptoms it is best that you speak to your doctor or nurse. A simple urine or blood test can show the extent of the problem. If high sugar levels are noted you may need to modify your diet, take tablets or very, very occasionally you may require daily injections.

**Inability to sleep at night**

Often patients who are taking steroids will find that they are unable to sleep at night. This can occur if the tablets are taken late in the day.

The general rule is that you should not take your steroids any later than 6 o'clock in the evening. However, if you are experiencing difficulty sleeping it is better if you can take the tablets in the morning.
Agitation and anxiety

Sometimes steroids can make you feel anxious, agitated or even restless. If possible your doctor may consider reducing the dose of steroid you are taking.

Relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or listening to calming music may help you control or even stop any feelings of anxiety or agitation. Other forms of complementary therapies such as aromatherapy maybe helpful to you. Your doctor or nurse will be happy to discuss these topics further with you.

Other important points

You will be issued with a card detailing your steroid treatment. Please carry this card with you so that it can be shown to your doctor, dentist and nurse. Steroid tablets come in different doses. They tend to look similar so some people are unsure of the exact dose they are taking. To avoid any confusion as well as carrying the card it is helpful to have your tablets with you when you see the doctor.

You must not stop taking the tablets unless your doctor has advised you to do so. Frequently the doctor will tell you to reduce the dose a little every few days before you stop taking them.

Produced by the Edinburgh Cancer Centre

Version 1: 26/03/03