



Wear Referrals – Corticosteroid ('steroids') information

Usually when we talk of 'steroids' in veterinary medicine we mean 'corticosteroids', which are anti-inflammatory steroids, as opposed to anabolic steroids.

When are corticosteroids prescribed?

Corticosteroids are commonly used to treat a multitude of medical conditions. They dampen the body's immune response and are most commonly used to treat immune-mediated diseases (in which the body attacks its own cells). Examples of immune-mediated diseases include, immune-mediated haemolytic anaemia (destruction of red blood cells), immune-mediated thrombocytopenia (destruction of blood-clotting platelets) and immune-mediated polyarthritis (causing joint inflammation and swelling).

Side-effects of corticosteroids

Corticosteroids commonly cause mild, reversible side-effects, though a few patients show no side-effects or more marked side-effects.

Common side-effects include:

- Increased thirst and urination – patients should have regular access to water to drink and access to outside to urinate. This is one of the most common side effects.
- Increased appetite – the amount of food fed should not be increased as the pet will gain weight. Scavenging should be prevented.
- Panting – patients on corticosteroids may pant at rest and particularly at night time.
- Reduced tolerance of exercise – patients on corticosteroids for a prolonged period of time may tire more easily.

Less common or longer-term side-effects include:

- Increased susceptibility to infection – this may for example manifest as skin infections or urinary tract infections.
- Increased risk of blood clots – depending upon other medical conditions, we sometimes prescribe additional medications to limit blood clot risks
- Pot-bellied appearance and muscle wastage (particularly over the head and spine). This is a reversible side-effect that is seen when patients are on a prolonged course of treatment.



- Haircoat changes – coat thinning and poor hair regrowth. This is a reversible side-effect that is seen when patients are on a prolonged course of treatment.
- Insulin resistance – Corticosteroids compete against insulin and may trigger diabetes mellitus in patients that are borderline diabetic. Diabetics that require corticosteroids are likely to have an increased dose of insulin to keep their blood glucose controlled.

What should I do if my pet shows side effects?

Please contact a vet directly as if the side-effects are worrisome or debilitating it may be necessary to adjust the treatment or consider alternative medications. Do not stop the medication abruptly without discussing with a vet – rapid withdrawal of corticosteroids can cause severe problems.

Prednisolone is used as a first-line immunosuppressive drug. Other drugs can be added if the prednisolone is not fully effective or if the side-effects are unacceptable – a second drug may allow slightly more rapid tapering of the prednisolone dose.

Gradual dose reductions

Prednisolone dose reductions (tapering) must be done gradually to avoid recurrence of clinical signs or withdrawal effects. Usually we aim to taper and consider stopping prednisolone over a 3-6 month period after the start of treatment. More rapid dose tapering increases the risk of recurrence.

Important – do not combine with NSAIDs

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs such as carprofen, meloxicam, robenacoxib etc.) must not be given to a patient on corticosteroids – this is a high risk for gastrointestinal ulceration.

