

Prednisone



Digestive Health
Foundation

Your doctor has prescribed the drug prednisone for you. Prednisone is also called prednisolone or cortisone. It is used for many different complaints, including arthritis, asthma and inflammation of the liver or bowel. Prednisone is based on a natural hormone that is produced by the adrenal glands in your body. While you are taking prednisone your adrenal glands do not produce much of the natural hormone and it takes a few days to return to normal levels if you stop taking the medication suddenly. For this reason, it is usually necessary to reduce the dose gradually. It is very important to call your GP or specialist if you have vomiting or diarrhoea and cannot take your prednisone for any reason. If you reduce the dose too quickly you may feel faint or very tired. Call your doctor if this happens.

SIDE EFFECTS

Prednisone, particularly at high dose, may cause a number of problems. Mild or even moderate side effects may cause much less trouble than the disease being treated and it may be best to put up with them for a short period of time. More serious complications occasionally lead to a change in medication.

These are some of the problems that can occur. This list is meant to help you understand what the medication can do - it isn't meant to frighten you and most people do not experience these problems.

1. CHANGE IN MOOD

Rarely people report that prednisone has an effect on their mood with either mild depression or a feeling of elation - feeling a bit "high". Some people develop insomnia, especially on a high dose. If you have strange dreams or if you have trouble sleeping, try taking your medication in the morning.

2. WEIGHT GAIN

If you take a high dose of prednisone for a long time you may gain weight. Sometimes this is most noticeable in your face, which can become more round than usual. Weight is also more likely to go on around the hips and abdomen than on legs or arms. This extra weight is not permanent and is much more likely to occur at high doses (i.e. above 20mg/day).

3. FLUID RETENTION

Prednisone can make the body retain salt and water. This is one of the reasons for weight gain and can cause an increase in blood pressure. This can be treated.

4. EASY BRUISING

Prednisone can make the tiny blood vessels under the skin break more easily. Because of this, a slight bump can cause a bruise.

5. HAIR GROWTH

Some women notice that they grow more hair on their limbs and face while taking the medication. This is reversible. Some women choose to bleach the hair or have electrolysis.

6. ACNE

Rarely people develop acne on their face or chest and back. This is a temporary problem.

7. HIGH BLOOD SUGAR

Rarely the blood sugar increases during treatment with prednisone and it may be necessary to check the level. It can be treated if need be and is reversible when the dose is reduced or the medication stopped.

8. OSTEOPOROSIS

People may develop osteoporosis (brittle bones) if they take prednisone at a high dose for a long time. You can reduce the chance of osteoporosis occurring if you make sure that you have 3-4 serves of dairy food or a calcium supplement every day. If you are at risk, your doctor will organise a bone density test, and if the bone density is low prescribe treatment.

9. MUSCLE WEAKNESS

In some people, the muscles in thighs and upper arms become weak while taking prednisone. This can make walking up steps or brushing hair more difficult. This is reversible.

10. EYE PROBLEMS

On high dose prednisone some people report troubles focusing their eyes. This quickly improves when the dose is dropped. Very rarely, very long periods of treatment at high doses can cause cataracts to develop. Your eyes will be checked if need be.

11. EFFECT ON THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

Prednisone is used to "calm down" the immune system in inflammatory bowel and liver disease, but it can also reduce the ability of the body to fight off infections. If you are on prednisone try not to expose yourself to other people who have an infectious disease. If you catch the 'flu, chickenpox, bronchitis or any other infection you must inform your doctor.

12. LOW POTASSIUM LEVELS

Prednisone can make the body lose potassium. A very low level of potassium can cause health problems, so a blood test may be necessary from time to time to check the level. You may need to eat more fruits which contain potassium - like bananas or apricots - or take potassium tablets.

13. AVASCULAR NECROSIS OF THE HIP

Very, very rarely people who are on high doses of prednisone for a long time develop severe pain in their hip due to a problem with the blood supply. If this happens, and it is extremely unlikely, a hip replacement is sometimes necessary.

SHOULD I TAKE MY MEDICATION?

Yes.

A list of side effects is always alarming. Side effects can make a drug seem more likely to harm than help. This is certainly not true for prednisone. Your doctor would not have prescribed prednisone if you did not need it. However, it is important that you know about the possible side effects so that you can discuss them with your doctor if you have any questions.