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First Script Prescription Benefit News
for Workers' Compensation

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Ask The Pharmacist

To suggest a topic, send an email to: AskThePharmacist@cvty.us.com

What are the different types of steroid medications?

The term "steroid" describes substances that are produced by glands in the human body from a common precursor, cholesterol, and are similar structurally and chemically. It might be said that much of their similarity ends there because they regulate and influence such a wide variety of different body functions and physiologic processes. In general, they can be thought of as one of two types: sex steroids or corticosteroids (glucocorticoids and mineralocorticoids).

Sex steroids, like testosterone, estrogen, and progestin, are produced in the testis, ovaries, and adrenal glands. Anabolic steroid medications are synthetic relatives of testosterone and are used (and misused) to increase lean muscle mass and enhance athletic performance. Hair growth, voice deepening, and a range of other "masculinizing" physical and behavioral effects are also noted. The female sex steroids (estrogen and progestin) have far reaching effects on the cardiovascular system, brain, skin, hair, bone, reproductive cycle, and the development of secondary sex characteristics.

Corticosteroid medications are synthetic relatives of naturally occurring adrenal hormones (like cortisol) that regulate metabolism, immune response, blood volume, and pressure. They are readily available in brand and generic versions in injectable, topical, inhaled, and oral dosage forms. Synthetic corticosteroids are also available in a range of potencies, from low to ultra-high, determined by the degree to which they inhibit inflammation and related to their potential for side effects.

Corticosteroids are further characterized as either glucocorticoids or mineralocorticoids. Mineralocorticoids, like aldosterone, regulate blood volume and pressure. Glucocorticoids (like prednisone, methylprednisolone, and dexamethasone) regulate the activation of immune cells.

Glucocorticoids are useful for reducing inflammation, treating swelling, itching, redness, and allergic reactions, as well as for down-regulating a hyperactive immune system. Examples of immune hyperactivity would include lung and airway hyper-reactivity, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, ulcerative colitis, and autoimmune reactions. An autoimmune reaction occurs when an individual's normal immune response is exaggerated and prolonged, doing damage to body structures and organs. A "cytokine storm," described as complicating recovery from COVID-19 illness, is a good example of an immune response that is not just "too strong," but also keeps going when it shouldn't, creating a health emergency.[1]

As useful and important as they are, steroids have serious side effects, often related to the duration of use, including blood sugar increases, osteoporosis, immune suppression, delayed wound healing, fat distribution abnormalities, and mood changes. Longer treatment courses (more than a week or so) require a gradual taper of the dose to allow your own cortisol cycle to re-adjust.

In workers' comp, steroid medications have often played a role in the management of pain related to joint injuries, either alone or incorporated in "trigger point" injections with an anesthetic medication like lidocaine.[2] They are also used to reduce inflammation in the management of certain lung injuries.

Recently, dexamethasone, a corticosteroid, was found in a large study to reduce deaths in hospitalized COVID-19 patients on mechanical ventilation or supplemental oxygen therapy.[3] A National Institutes of Health (NIH) COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines Panel is currently recommending a course of dexamethasone treatment (up to 10 days) for such patients, and also recommends against dexamethasone in patients who do not require supplemental oxygen.[4]

The Official Disability Guidelines offer conditional recommendations for the use of corticosteroid injections in a selected number of joint pain conditions and for inhaled and intranasal corticosteroid treatments for asthma and upper airway coughs.[5]

1. https://creakyjoints.org/living-with-arthritis/coronavirus/managing-symptoms/cytokine-storm-covid-19-autoimmune-disease/
2. Medical News Today – Everything you need to know about trigger point injections. December 23, 2019. Accessed July 8, 2020 at: https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/327384
3. COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines Panel. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Treatment Guidelines. National Institutes of Health. Available at https://www.covid19treatmentguidelines.nih.gov/ . Accessed July 8, 2020.
4. Randomized Evaluation of COVID-19 Therapy (RECOVERY). Low-cost dexamethasone reduces death by up to one third in hospitalized patients with severe respiratory complications of COVID-19. 2020. Available at: https://www.recoverytrial.net/news/low-cost-dexamethasone-reduces-death-by-up-to-one-third-in-hospitalised-patients-with-severe-respiratory-complications-of-covid-19. Accessed June 23, 2020.
5. The Official Disability Guidelines – Accessed on June 5, 2020 at: https://www.odgbymcg.com

Drug of the Month

Dexamethasone

Dexamethasone is a synthetic corticosteroid medication used in clinical practice to reduce inflammation, immune hyperactivity, and as replacement therapy in adrenal insufficiency. Other medications in this category you may recognize include prednisone, methylprednisolone, and hydrocortisone. The major distinctions among them are attributable to differences in potency and duration of activity. Dexamethasone is among the more potent and long-lasting corticosteroids for oral and injectable use. A large number of topical corticosteroids (like triamcinolone, beclomethasone, and hydrocortisone) are available and also classified according to their relative potency.

Dexamethasone is available in brand and generic versions in a wide variety of dosage forms, including oral tablets and solutions, eye and ear drops, intraocular solution and as a solution for intravenous or intramuscular injection. Dexamethasone is indicated for a very wide range of clinical uses, including allergic reactions, autoimmune conditions like rheumatoid and psoriatic arthritis, lupus, and ulcerative colitis as well as skin conditions like atopic dermatitis and psoriasis.

Newly released results from a large, randomized, controlled trial of possible treatments for hospital patients with COVID-19 illness, called RECOVERY,[1] suggest that dexamethasone may offer promise for treatment and survival in severely ill hospitalized COVID-19 infected patients.

The dexamethasone versus "usual care" arm of the RECOVERY study was conducted with 6,425 patients and dexamethasone treatment reduced deaths by one third in patients receiving mechanical ventilation, and by one fifth in patients receiving oxygen only. There was no benefit observed in patients who did not require respiratory support and it was not studied in patients outside the hospital setting. Peter Horby, Professor of Emerging Infectious Diseases in the Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, and one of the chief investigators for the trial, said, "Dexamethasone is the first drug to be shown to improve survival in COVID-19. This is an extremely welcome result. The survival benefit is clear and large in those patients who are sick enough to require oxygen treatment, so dexamethasone should now become standard of care in these patients. Dexamethasone is inexpensive, on the shelf, and can be used immediately to save lives worldwide."[1] It should be noted that while these dexamethasone results appear very encouraging in a severely ill subset of COVID-19 patients, scientific peer review, journal publication, and U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) review and approval for this indication is not yet complete.

An expert panel guideline,[2] developed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has recommended the use of dexamethasone for hospitalized patients on mechanical ventilation or who require supplemental oxygen, while cautioning against its use in patients not requiring supplemental oxygen or in community care settings. According to Vizient, a major drug purchasing organization, orders for generic dexamethasone have risen dramatically since the RECOVERY study first indicated these results, with orders increasing 167% on the day of release, June 16.[3]

Dexamethasone products in tablet and liquid forms are included on the First Script standard formulary with limitations of use of less than a 90-day supply in the preceding 365 days, use as a chronic steroid therapy is not recommended. Smart PA messaging has also been updated to reflect the potential emerging use of dexamethasone for the treatment of COVID-19 infected claimants.

For additional information, please contact your First Script Account Manager or Account Pharmacist.

1. Oxford University News Release June 16, 2020 – Low-cost dexamethasone reduces death by up to one third in hospitalized patients with severe respiratory complications of COVID-19. Accessed on June 18, 2020 at: https://www.recoverytrial.net/files/recovery_dexamethasone_statement_160620_v2final.pdf
2. COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines Panel. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Treatment Guidelines. National Institutes of Health. Accessed at: https://www.covid19treatmentguidelines.nih.gov/dexamethasone/ on July 9, 2020.
3. The Wall Street Journal. Dexamethasone Demand soars After Positive Covid-19 Study. July 9, 2020. Accessed at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/dexamethasone-demand-soars-after-positive-covid-19-study-11593079202 on July 9 2020

Governmental Activity by State

Find out more about the governmental updates and potential changes currently being proposed in your state

To find out more about the governmental updates and potential changes currently being proposed in your state, visit the Coventry News and Insights page each month to read our Government Relations Newsletter. Find this month's newsletter here.

Clinical Updates

Annual First Script Drug Trends Analysis

In part two of our drug trends series, we provide analysis on the trends experienced within our combined in-network and out-of-network channels to address the total view of prescription activity. Also, visit our blog where we will address specific trends highlighted in this edition of the series. If you missed an edition of the series simply visit our Drug Trends page.

Sam's Club® Out-of-Network

On August 16, 2020, Sam's Club Pharmacies will no longer be included in the First Script® Pharmacy Network. As you know, pharmacies participating in the network have agreed to market-competitive rates for retail pharmacy services that offer convenient, cost-effective access for our clients. As Sam's Club has not agreed to the standard terms and conditions, they will no longer be a participating pharmacy in the network. Read the bulletin for more information.

Dexamethasone for selected uses in COVID-19

Newly released results from a large, randomized, controlled trial of possible treatments for hospital patients with COVID-19 illness, called RECOVERY, suggest that a familiar medication, dexamethasone, may offer promise for treatment and survival in severely ill, hospitalized, COVID-19 infected patients. Read the bulletin for more information.