

About Inhaled Steroids



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Asthma is a disease of airway inflammation (swelling). Inhaled steroids work by reducing the swelling in the airways in your lungs, which helps to prevent asthma flare-ups. Inhaled steroids do not work right away, so they need to be used regularly or as your health care professional recommends. Inhaled steroids (such as QVAR, Flovent, or Pulmicort) are medicines that you breathe into your lungs. They work best for anyone who has asthma symptoms more than two times a week. They contain steroids that are similar to a hormone called “cortisone,” which your body makes naturally. When you take inhaled steroids, your airways become less sensitive to things that “trigger” your asthma and you breathe better. This means that you will have fewer asthma flare-ups and symptoms.

About side effects

Inhaled steroids have few side effects. They are generally safe when used in usual recommended doses. There can be a higher risk of side effects if you use high doses of inhaled steroids.

Taking inhaled steroids has fewer risks than not controlling your asthma.

You may be able to use less medicine if you control and avoid your asthma triggers (such as indoor pets, dust mites, cockroaches, pollen, cigarette and fireplace smoke, or strong odors).

Managing your asthma with the least amount of medicine needed can help reduce any side effects you may have. One such side effect is thrush (yeast infection) in your mouth. To lower the risk of getting a yeast infection in your mouth:

- Use your inhaler with a spacer. Check with your health care professional about the correct spacer for you.
- Always rinse out your mouth (rinse and spit) after you take the medicine. You might find it easier to use your inhaler before you brush your teeth.

Commonly asked questions about inhaled steroids

Is this the same steroid body builders use?

No. Some body builders may use testosterone to “bulk up.” Testosterone is different from the inhaled steroid you use to control your asthma. In fact, using inhaled steroids allows athletes with asthma to breathe easier and to participate to their fullest potential.

Is there an increased risk of cataracts and glaucoma with inhaled steroids?

Some recent articles have suggested that patients over 65 on high doses of inhaled steroids may have a higher risk of getting cataracts and glaucoma. Patients using lower doses of inhaled





steroids do not appear to be at increased risk of developing glaucoma. If you are taking high doses of inhaled steroids, check with your health care professional, especially if you have glaucoma or one of the following risk factors for glaucoma:

- diabetes mellitus (high sugar in your blood)
- extreme nearsightedness
- a blood relative with glaucoma

Your health care professional may refer you to have your eyes checked by an eye specialist.

Is there an increased risk of osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) with inhaled steroids?

This issue is still being studied and we don't have all the answers yet. Some studies suggest that taking inhaled steroids can increase the risk of osteoporosis. Anyone can decrease their chances of osteoporosis (whether or not you are taking inhaled steroids) with regular physical activity. Taking a calcium supplement (1,000 – 1,500 mg/day) and vitamin D (400 units/day, the dose in most multiple vitamins) may help prevent bone thinning. If you have questions about any of these preventive measures, check with your health care professional.

Will inhaled steroids affect my child's growth?

During the first year using inhaled steroids a child's growth may be slightly effected. On average, studies show that it can slow growth by a half inch. After the first year of treatment, the child's growth rate "catches up" and returns to normal. When used regularly, inhaled steroids are the best medicines to control asthma. Asthma that is not controlled causes growth to slow as well. Be sure to work with your child's doctor to find the lowest dose of inhaled steroids to keep their asthma well-controlled.

Can I become addicted to inhaled steroids?

No. Inhaled steroids are not addictive. However, you must use them regularly to get the full benefit.

Are inhaled steroids safe to use during pregnancy?

Inhaled steroids are generally safe to use during pregnancy in the usual recommended doses. Be sure to let your health care professional know right away if you are pregnant. They may need to change your inhaled steroid to a different brand.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org. Here you'll find the Health Encyclopedia, which offers more in-depth information on this and many other topics.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.