Corticosteroid injections

The aim of this information sheet is to help answer some of the questions you may have about having a corticosteroid injection. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives of the procedure as well as what you can expect when you come to hospital.

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to the doctor, nurse or physiotherapist caring for you. This sheet does not list all of the uses and side effects of the medicines we use – please see the manufacturer’s patient information leaflet that comes with the medicine for further information.

What is a corticosteroid injection?

A corticosteroid (or ‘cortisone’) is an anti-inflammatory medicine, which can be injected directly into the tissues that are causing your symptoms. It is a safer alternative to taking anti-inflammatory medication by mouth. It acts directly in the area injected and is not the same as the steroids taken by bodybuilders or athletes.

What are the benefits – why should I have a corticosteroid injection?

The injection can help to relieve swelling, pain and stiffness caused by inflammation. This may in turn help you to start your rehabilitation and return to normal activities sooner by ‘breaking the cycle’ of pain and inflammation. It can also be helpful to aid in the diagnosis of your condition if it is not clear which structures are responsible for your pain. You may also have a local anaesthetic injected at the same time, which allows for temporary pain relief.

What are the risks?

The possible side effects of the injection are rare and include:

- Flushing of the face for a few hours.
- Small area of fat loss or change in skin colour around the injection site.
- An increase in pain 24-48 hours after the injection.
- Diabetic patients may notice a temporary increase in blood sugar levels.
- Temporary bruising or bleeding if you are taking blood thinning tablets (such as aspirin or warfarin).
- Infection: if the area becomes hot, swollen and painful for more than 24 hours, or if you feel generally unwell, you should contact your physiotherapist or doctor immediately. If they are unavailable, you should seek advice from your GP or Accident & Emergency (A&E) department.
- Slight vaginal bleeding / menstrual irregularities.
- Allergic reaction to the drug: You will be asked to wait for a short time after your injection to check for any reactions.
You should not have the injection carried out if you:

- Have any infection in the area or anywhere else in your body.
- Are allergic to local anaesthetic or steroid.
- Feel unwell.
- Are due to have surgery in that area soon.
- Are pregnant or breast feeding.
- Have poorly controlled diabetes.
- Do not want the injection.

**Are there any other alternatives?**

Alternatives to the injection include lifestyle changes, use of anti-inflammatory medicines and physiotherapy. Occasionally, a surgical opinion may be helpful.

**What happens during the injection?**

The benefits and risks of the injection will be explained to you in detail. You will then be placed in a comfortable position. The skin is cleaned with antiseptic. A needle is gently positioned into the affected area and the solution is injected through the needle. A plaster will be placed over the site to keep it clean. A few minutes after the injection you will be examined again.

**Will I feel any pain?**

The injection is not particularly painful as the doctor or physiotherapist is thoroughly trained in this procedure. Sometimes it can be sore for a few hours after the procedure.

**What happens after the procedure?**

If local anaesthetic is also used in the injection, your pain may start to improve within a few minutes although this may return when it wears off (similar to when you visit the dentist). The steroid usually starts to work after 24–48 hours, but it may take a little longer. The effect of the injection varies from person to person and usually continues to last for about six weeks. This does not necessarily mean that you will need a second injection, so long as you follow the advice given to you after the injection.

**What do I need to do after I go home?**

Depending on the cause of your pain, you may be asked to rest the area for a short period after the injection. This does not usually mean total rest, but refraining from activities that make your pain worse, after which you should try to gradually return to full function. This is to maximize the benefit given by the injection. You may also be shown some exercises to do whilst you are in the clinic, or referred for physiotherapy treatment. If you are having other medical treatment within six weeks, you should tell the treating clinician that you have received a corticosteroid injection.
Will I have a follow-up appointment?

You may be asked to attend a follow up appointment a few weeks after your injection to check your progress. Occasionally, more than one injection is needed and this can be discussed at this appointment.

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about corticosteroid injections, please contact the Musculoskeletal Assessment Clinic on 020 7188 7612 between the hours of 9:00am – 5:00pm Monday to Friday and leave a message for one of the clinicians to contact you.

Pharmacy medicines helpline
For information about any medicines that you have been prescribed at Guy’s and St Thomas’ hospitals, you can speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.
 t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) – To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust’s services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:
 t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas’
 t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy’s
e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC) – For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas’ Hospital.
 t: 020 7188 3416

Language support services – If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.
 t: 020 7188 8815
 fax: 020 7188 5953

NHS Direct – Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day.
 t: 0845 4647
 w: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

NHS Choices – Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.
 w: www.nhs.uk

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