

Steroid treatment for premature babies

Information for patients, parents and guardians

We have given you this information leaflet because we are considering treating your baby with steroids to help your baby's lungs.

This is an important decision and we want you to be aware of what the treatment involves, including the benefits and risks of the treatment. This leaflet is about steroid treatment given when a baby is at least one week old.

Why are we considering treating your baby with steroids?

When babies are born prematurely their lungs are not fully developed. They need help with their breathing and we often need to put them onto a ventilator machine.

No matter how careful we are, being on a ventilator damages the lungs, so we want to minimise this damage by getting babies off the ventilator as soon as we can. We believe that treatment with steroids is likely to help your baby to stop needing the ventilator.

What does steroid treatment involve?

Your baby would be given dexamethasone (the steroid medication) twice each day.

We usually give the steroids for ten days, but may carry on for longer if we think that would be best for your baby. It can be given into the bloodstream or into your baby's feeding tube. We use the lowest dose that we can, and the dose reduces over the ten day period.

What are the benefits of steroid treatment?

- **Coming off the ventilator**
Premature babies on ventilators develop inflammation in their lungs and steroids reduce this inflammation. This means that steroid treatment would make it much more likely that your baby would stop needing the ventilator. If your baby continues to need the ventilator, we will be likely to be able to turn the settings down to protect the lungs.

- **Needing less oxygen**
High levels of oxygen damage babies' lungs and other parts of their body. Steroid treatment would mean that your baby is likely to need less oxygen and is less likely to go home with oxygen.

Your baby's doctor may have talked to you about your baby's life expectancy and whether they are likely to be able to go home with you. Having steroid treatment will not affect this.

What are the important short-term risks of steroid treatment?

- **High blood sugar**
Steroid treatment can increase a baby's blood sugar and this may need to be treated with insulin.

- **High blood pressure**
Steroids can increase a baby's blood pressure and we closely monitor the blood pressure of any baby on steroid treatment.

- **Infection**

Infections are an important problem for premature babies and steroid treatment can make it more likely that a baby gets an infection.

- **Gut problems**

In some circumstances, steroids can cause bleeding or damage to the gut, but studies don't show that this kind of steroid treatment causes gut problems for babies.

We believe that these short-term problems are less likely to happen with the low steroid dose which we use.

What are the important long-term risks of steroid treatment?

- **Brain development and movement problems**

Children who are born prematurely are more likely to have problems with their brain development or moving their bodies.

Doctors have worried that steroid treatment may increase the risk of these developmental problems. However, the best available evidence doesn't show any difference in the chance of having developmental problems between babies who had steroids and babies who didn't.

How will we decide whether to give steroid treatment?

Steroids have been given to many babies and we have lots of experience of using them on this neonatal unit. There is still research being done, particularly to look at the long-term effects of steroid treatment as children grow up.

We always try to treat any other lung problems first (especially infections and excess blood flow caused by a patent duct (PDA)), but for some babies we can't find anything else which works. For those babies, we believe that

steroids are the best way to get them off the ventilator to protect their lungs from damage.

The decision to recommend steroid treatment is always made by a senior neonatal doctor after thinking carefully about the risks and benefits for each individual baby.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk to your baby's nurse or doctor. We will talk to you in person before we start the treatment.

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone **023 8120 4688** for help.

www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrenshospital

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