

Physiotherapy Department

Steroid Injections for Joint and Soft Tissue Conditions

What is a steroid?

Steroids are a type of drug. They can be given as tablets or injections. Steroids suppress inflammation. They can be used to treat pain, swelling and stiffness in a variety of musculoskeletal conditions.

Why don't I just take anti-inflammatory tablets?

You can, but an injection can be used to target pain from wear and tear in joints (arthritis) or inflammation in soft tissues more effectively than taking tablets. It can also avoid side effects such as heartburn and indigestion from taking medication over a long period of time.

What are the advantages of steroid injections?

Steroid injections are quick and easy to perform. Their action is fast, reliable with minimal side effects. By reducing your pain, you may be able to start your recovery and return to normal activities more quickly. This also means you may not need further treatment.

Are there any disadvantages of steroid injections?

Side effects have been reported. However they are rare e.g. the chance of infection is less than 0.001%. Every effort is made to minimise the risk.

Are there any times that I should not have an injection?

Steroids are avoided in people with an infection, whether on the skin or elsewhere in the body, especially if medication is being taken. Steroids may reduce the body's ability to fight the infection.

You need to tell the physiotherapist if you are feeling unwell. Another appointment can be arranged.

Injections are not given during pregnancy or when breastfeeding.

You should not consent to an injection if you are at all worried about the procedure. The physiotherapist will be able to answer any of your questions.

You need to tell the physiotherapist if you have experienced problems with injections before, such as at the dentist, as you may be allergic to local anaesthetic.

You also need to tell your physiotherapist if you:

- Are taking medicine that lower the immune response of the body, or
- Have an implant such as a heart valve replacement or joint replacement, or
- Are allergic to steroids - occasionally if you do not realise this you may experience a 'flare' of your condition after the injection but this should settle of its own accord after 24-48 hours.

Steroids are used with care in people who have diabetes as the injection may temporarily raise blood sugar.

Steroid injections are used with caution in people with blood clotting disorders or anyone taking anti-coagulants as there is a risk of bleeding.

Steroids are not used routinely around tendons as the injection may weaken them.

What are the possible side effects?

You may notice that your face is flushed for a few hours.

There may be slight vaginal bleeding.

With injections close to the surface of the skin you may notice a lightening or thinning of the skin or dimpling of the muscle at the injection site.

As with any procedure where the skin is pierced with a needle there is a risk of bruising from broken blood vessels or infection. If the area becomes hot, swollen and painful for more than 24 hours or you feel unwell you should make an urgent appointment to see your doctor.

Can I go straight home after the injection?

You will be routinely asked to sit in the waiting area for a little while after your injection to ensure that you do not have an allergic reaction to the local anaesthetic. You may like to arrange for someone to drive you home.

How is the injection done?

The skin is cleaned with an antiseptic swab. The procedure is in two parts. First a local anaesthetic is injected to numb the skin and second a slow release steroid (Depo-Medrone) is injected into the affected part. The skin is covered with a sticking plaster which should be kept on for 24 hours.

I've always heard that steroid injections are painful. Are they?

Not necessarily, your physiotherapist has had intensive training in the procedure. Sometimes it can be sore afterwards or your pain may worsen temporarily and you should take pain tablets for this.

How fast does the injection work?

The local anaesthetic will numb the pain within a few minutes and as at the dentist last for about 1 hour. The steroid usually starts to work after about 24-48 hours, but may take longer.

How long does the effect last?

This varies from person to person but an injection may take up to 6 weeks to work.

How many injections can I have?

This depends on the part of the body being treated. Usually one injection is sufficient but if the pain is severe or has been there for a long time you may need a second one.

What should I do after the injection?

Rest the part for 48 hours. You will be advised when you can begin to increase both your day to day activities and physiotherapy exercises.

When will I have to be seen again?

You will be given a follow up appointment to review progress. Whilst inflammation can recur, with appropriate aftercare advice and exercises, steroids may provide months to years of pain relief.

For further information:

Please contact the Physiotherapy Department, Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital on 01603 286 990.

Alternatively you can contact:

- **NHS 111** [which was introduced to make it easier for you to access local NHS healthcare services.](#)
- **Arthritis Research UK** 0300 790 0400 (www.arthritisresearchuk.org)



