Steroids

Steroids (sometimes called corticosteroids) occur naturally within your body but they can also be created in a laboratory for medical purposes. One of their key functions in the treatment of brain tumours is to reduce inflammation/swelling and ease associated symptoms. Steroids therefore help with symptom management rather than treating the cancer itself. They also protect the brain at the time of surgery.

It’s highly likely that you’ll be given [steroids](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org/NR/exeres/05EFEFD0-1D42-4972-BF9A-3F7FB7C3012F%2Cframeless.htm?NRMODE=Published#MainControl_Glossary_ZoneMain_GlossaryPlaceholderControl1_ctl00_PresentationModeControlsContainer_SECTION_S) at some point during the course of your treatment. There are various uses for steroids for brain tumour patients. The information here summarises when and why you might be given steroids.

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## After diagnosis

There is only a fixed amount of space in the brain and some of this is taken up by the tumour, creating swelling and putting pressure on surrounding tissues. This pressure can cause symptoms such as headaches, sickness and [seizures](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org/NR/exeres/05EFEFD0-1D42-4972-BF9A-3F7FB7C3012F%2Cframeless.htm?NRMODE=Published#MainControl_Glossary_ZoneMain_GlossaryPlaceholderControl1_ctl00_PresentationModeControlsContainer_SECTION_S) (fits). Your doctor may give you steroids to reduce the pressure and relieve these symptoms. Steroids are also given to help manage symptoms when a tumour is advanced at the first point of diagnosis or if a tumour has come back.

## Before or after treatment

If you are having [radiotherapy](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org/NR/exeres/05EFEFD0-1D42-4972-BF9A-3F7FB7C3012F%2Cframeless.htm?NRMODE=Published#MainControl_Glossary_ZoneMain_GlossaryPlaceholderControl1_ctl00_PresentationModeControlsContainer_SECTION_R) or surgery as part of your treatment, you may be given steroids afterwards to help bring down swelling caused by these treatments. If you are having [chemotherapy](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org/NR/exeres/05EFEFD0-1D42-4972-BF9A-3F7FB7C3012F%2Cframeless.htm?NRMODE=Published#MainControl_Glossary_ZoneMain_GlossaryPlaceholderControl1_ctl00_PresentationModeControlsContainer_SECTION_C), a low dosage of steroids may be given to you if you experience nausea.

## Important points to remember

**Keep taking the steroids for as long as your doctor tells you to.**After taking steroids for a few days, your body will start to produce less of its own naturally. To allow for this, your doctor is likely to reduce your dosage gradually. Stopping steroids suddenly can make you unwell, so please follow the advice of your doctor.

**If you are given a steroid card by your doctor, make sure you carry it with you at all times.**A steroid card would usually be given to you by your nurse or doctor if you are taking steroids for more than a week. If you are given a steroid card, you must always carry it with you – it contains details of your steroid type and dosage, which is important information if you need to have medical treatment.

## How are steroids taken?

There are different ways that steroids can be taken, including:

* Orally (as tablets or liquid medicine)
* By injection (either to the vein or muscle)

## How long will I need to take steroids?

Generally, you’ll only take steroids for a short while (a few days or weeks) but there are some cases when you’ll need to take them for longer.

## What if I forget to take my steroids?

You should, of course, make every effort to remember to take your steroids when you are required to. It might help to leave yourself a note or set an alarm to remind you to do so. If you do miss a dose though, don’t try to compensate by taking a double dose next time. Speak to your doctor to see what they advise.

## What are the side effects of steroids?

As is generally the case with any medication, steroids affect different people in different ways and according to the exact type and dosage prescribed. You should talk to your doctor about any side effects you experience. Please remember that you should never just stop taking steroids without your doctor advising you to do so. Some of the common side effects are outlined below.

### Increased appetite

It’s fairly common to feel hungrier than usual when you are on steroids. Eating more can obviously lead to weight gain. Once you stop taking steroids, your appetite will return to normal. If you’re concerned about weight gain, speak to your doctor.

### Irritation to the stomach lining

If you are taking steroids in tablet form, you will need to take them with food or milk to prevent irritation to the stomach lining as they can cause stomach ulcers. You may experience indigestion or heartburn after taking steroids tablets. If so, speak to your doctor.

### Greater chance of infection

If you notice any signs of infection (such as a temperature, redness, soreness) or wounds are taking longer than usual to heal, let your doctor know. If necessary, you’ll be given antibiotics to help fight the infection.

### Water retention

You may experience swelling around your hands and feet where your body is retaining fluid. To help reduce this, avoid standing in one place for too long or crossing your legs. It’s also helpful to raise your feet when you sit or lie down. Following a low sodium diet can also be beneficial, but check with your doctor before making changes to your diet.

### Changes to blood sugar levels

You may feel thirstier when taking steroids, or need to urinate more frequently. If you do, you should speak to your doctor promptly as these symptoms could suggest that your blood sugar levels have temporarily heightened. During your course of steroids, your blood sugar levels will be monitored via blood tests.

### Difficulty sleeping

Some people experience difficulty sleeping when they are taking steroids. Let your doctor know if this happens to you. They may suggest that you take the steroids early on in the day to minimise disruption to your sleep pattern. It’s very important that you speak to your doctor before making any changes to your medication schedule.

### Emotional effects

Some people feel anxious, irritable and emotional for a little while after they have stopped taking steroids. As with any other side effects, speak to your doctor about any such changes you are experiencing.

### Muscle thinning

If you take steroids for a long time (i.e. for a period of more than a few months), you may find that your skin feels thinner and that it bruises more easily. This is an uncommon, temporary side-effect. It generally disappears once the dosage is lowered, although some people experience muscle cramping for a short time after they have stopped taking steroids.

### Bone thinning

Taking steroids for a long time (i.e. a period of longer than a few months)
can cause bone thinning (osteoporosis). This means that bone fractures are more likely. If you are concerned about bone thinning, you should speak to your doctor.

# What if I have further questions?

If you require further information, any clarification of information, or wish to discuss any concerns, please contact our Support and Information Team.

* Call 0808 800 0004 (free from landlines and most mobiles including 3, O2, Orange, T-mobile, EE, Virgin and Vodafone)
* Email support@thebraintumourcharity.org
* Join our online forums at [www.thebraintumourcharity.org/forums](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org/forums)

# About us

The Brain Tumour Charity makes every effort to ensure that we provide accurate, up-to-date and unbiased facts about brain tumours. We hope that these will add to the medical advice you have already been given.

Please do continue to talk to your doctor if you are worried about any medical issues. We are the UK’s leading brain tumour charity. We fund scientific and clinical research into brain tumours and offer information and support to those affected, whilst raising awareness and influencing policy.

We rely 100% on charitable donations to fund our vital work. If you would
like to make a donation, or want to find out about other ways to support us including fundraising, leaving a gift in your will or giving in memory, please visit us at [www.thebraintumourcharity.org](http://www.thebraintumourcharity.org) or call 01252 749043.

# About this fact sheet

This fact sheet has been written and edited by The Brain Tumour Charity’s Support and Information Team. The accuracy of medical information has been verified by a leading neuro-oncologist. Our fact sheets have been produced with the assistance of patient and carer representatives and up-to-date, reliable sources of evidence. If you would like a list of references for any of the fact sheets, or would like more information about how we produce them, please contact us.

# Steroids

# Your notes



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Version 1 (clear print), first produced in standard print format April 2012. Review date, by April 2014.