

Patient Information: Hydrocortisone replacement



What is Hydrocortisone?

Hydrocortisone is a steroid hormone produced by the adrenal gland. It regulates many of the body's functions and is essential for life.

Hydrocortisone is taken as a replacement for the natural hormone where this is deficient, either because of pituitary deficiency of ACTH (the hormone that stimulates the production of hydrocortisone by the adrenal gland) or failure of hydrocortisone production by the adrenal gland.

How do I take it?

A common dose is 15-20mg orally split over two or three times daily, and depending on your individual Endocrinologist's recommendations, e.g., 10mg before rising, 5mg at mid-day and 5mg at 4 p.m.

When would I need to take more hydrocortisone?

If you become ill then the body would naturally increase the output of steroid from your adrenal glands. Therefore if you are taking replacement steroid (hydrocortisone) it is essential to mimic the natural response by increasing your dose appropriately.

How can I let others know I take replacement hydrocortisone?

When you are prescribed your medication you will be given a 'blue steroid card' from the hospital to carry. You should also purchase and wear a medical necklace or bracelet, such as MedicAlert, to show your Hydrocortisone replacement therapy.

Emergency Injections - should I have these at home?

It is advisable for all patients on hydrocortisone replacement to have a 100mg injection pack at home and for them or their partners to be taught how to administer it. If you don't have one of these already, you can ask your GP or endocrinologist if they will prescribe this for you. Please check regularly that these preparations are not expired. Some endocrine clinics will help to show you how to inject in an emergency.

When do I know that I would need an emergency injection?

If you cannot absorb your tablets, or your usual replacement wasn't sufficient for an acute shock or illness, then gradually or perhaps quite quickly you would feel weak, sickly and light-headed.

Recommendations for changes in oral dose 'The Sick Rules'

If you become unwell you should take additional hydrocortisone. The amount depends on how unwell you are and the type of illness. The pituitary foundation provides some sensible examples:

If a patient is unwell they should take additional hydrocortisone. The amount depends on how unwell they are and the type of illness. Some examples are given below:

Situation	Increase in dose	Duration	Emergency?
Cold without fever	none		
Fever, flu, infection	double dose	duration of illness	see GP after 48 hours
Vomiting > once, diarrhoea and severe illness	Emergency 100mg injection if extra dose of 10-20mg cannot be kept down	restart usual dose once stable	Phone GP or go to A&E. Administer injection prior to this if emergency pack available (but still seek help)
Minor surgical procedure e.g. tooth extraction	20mg hydrocortisone before procedure	resume on usual dose immediately afterward	
Minor operation e.g. hernia repair	100mg im every 6 hours for 24 hours	resume on usual dose immediately afterward	
Major operation e.g. abdomen or chest	100mg im injection every 6 hours for 24 -72 hours and eating and drinking	reduce rapidly to usual dose	tell the surgeon and anaesthetist before the operation
Endoscopy	Double the dose the day before during bowel prep. For colonoscopy 100mg im before procedure	take usual dose on the morning of the procedure	drink lots of water to prevent dehydration. Inform your doctor.
Cystoscopy	Double dose on the day of procedure.	resume as normal	inform your doctor.
Severe shock e.g. bereavment or road traffic accident	20mg as tablet or 100mg intramuscular injection	See GP or hospital for further advice	Sudden and severe shock may be classed as an emergency - seek advice
Long haul flight > 12 hours	double dose on the day of the flight	extra dose every 6-8 hours when the day is legnthened. Usual regimen in timing with sleep / wake cycle when day is shortened.	Speak to your consultant before travel.
General stress, exams etc	not usually required		ask GP if concerned

How do I cope if I'm travelling away from home?

You should travel with a 100mg injection kit in case of emergency. This injection should be placed in a small cool bag, labelled with your name and kept with you at all times during your journey. You should ask your GP or endocrinologist for a letter about your injection kit, medication and your doses prescribed. This letter is essential to travel through security checks and will be helpful should you become unwell and have to see a doctor. It is wise to take an extra two weeks supply of hydrocortisone tablets with you in case you need to increase your usual dose whilst away. All medication should be kept in your hand luggage.