

Patient information

Hydrocortisone Replacement Therapy

Diabetes and Endocrinology

What is Hydrocortisone Replacement?

Hydrocortisone replacement is tablets of synthetic (man-made) cortisol usually taken two or three times daily. You will be taking this because your body is unable to produce enough cortisol to maintain well-being.

Why do I need this replacement therapy?

You need this replacement because you are unable to produce enough of the body's own natural steroid, cortisol. If you have had a disease of the pituitary or adrenal glands then the adrenal glands may be unable to produce enough cortisol for good health. This can also happen if you have been taking steroid medications for a long time for other health problems.

How do I take the replacement therapy?

You will need to take hydrocortisone tablets. The usual dose is between 20 and 30 milligrams every day. The tablets should be taken at regular intervals, usually two to three times during the day.

The aim is to mimic the body's natural production of cortisol, so the times you take your tablets are important. The body produces more cortisol during the day than at night so the first dose should be taken as soon as you wake up in the morning.

It is best if you can take it before you get out of bed. The rest of the doses should be spaced evenly throughout the day. The last dose should be taken ideally around 4pm, but no later than 6pm.

What if I miss a dose?

It is important that you do not miss any doses. If you do forget to take your dose you should take it as soon as you remember. You should carry on with the next dose as normal for that day. Do not take extra doses to make up for any that you may miss.

Are there any side effects?

As the aim of the treatment is to replace the body's natural steroid, side effects should not occur. You may have some weight gain if your dose is too high. This can be checked with blood tests and can be easily adjusted. Sometimes stomach irritation can happen and taking your tablets with food can ease this.

What if I become unwell?

You will need to increase all your doses of Hydrocortisone. How to do this is covered in a separate leaflet 'Hydrocortisone replacement therapy-what to do during illness and/or stress' PIF 1021. It is important that both you and your family/friends are aware of what to do should you become unwell.

What will I feel like on the treatment?

You will feel an improvement in your energy levels and an increased sense of well-being. Most people can lead normal lives. Your doctor or specialist will monitor you regularly to ensure your dose is at the right level for you. So long as you continue to take your tablets regularly and remember to increase them if you are unwell, then you should have few problems.

How will I know if the dose is not enough for me?

You may have loss of appetite with abdominal pain. You may also have nausea and vomiting. Increasing weakness and dizziness or fainting on standing up can also happen. If you have any of these symptoms you should contact your family doctor (GP) as soon as possible as you may need an adjustment of your dose of hydrocortisone.

What if I wanted to stop taking the tablets?

You should not do this without medical advice.

Why can I not just go ahead and reduce or stop taking Hydrocortisone?

Cortisol is vital to life and well-being, without cortisol, the body cannot function properly. If deficient for an extended time, serious illness and death can follow. When you take Hydrocortisone tablets your body adjusts to having this level of cortisol provided for it. If you were to remove this level of cortisol suddenly, your body would be unable to cope. If you cannot produce your own cortisol, you need this replacement to stay well. Without it you become very weak and feel dizzy, especially when getting out of bed or standing up. You can lose your appetite and feel nauseous. You would find it difficult to fight infections and can become seriously ill if an infection develops.

If you are having any problems with this medication, please discuss your concerns with your doctors at clinic. If you prefer you can talk to the specialist nurses, the contact number for them is at the end of this leaflet.

Is there an alternative treatment?

There are other forms of 'steroid' tablets that will replace cortisol for you. These are Prednisolone and Dexamethasone. These tablets are more potent, or stronger, in action than Hydrocortisone and so you will need to take smaller doses of them. Making changes to the dose of these can be difficult as they are effective in the body longer than Hydrocortisone. This can also mean that we cannot copy the body's cortisol production as well as we can with Hydrocortisone.

What else do I need to know?

- Once you start treatment you may need to continue it for life.
- **When you are taking hydrocortisone, you are exempt from prescription charges for this medicine.**
- You can get a form from your family doctor (GP) to arrange for an exemption certificate.
- You should always carry with you some form of identification which states that you are on steroid tablets. This can be a blue 'steroid card' which you can get from your pharmacist or medical identification jewellery that you can purchase yourself.
- This may be lifesaving if ever you are involved in an accident or found unconscious. It means that medical staff can treat you immediately and effectively wherever you are. It is also a good idea to carry a list of your medication and doses with you and to leave a list with your partner and/or parents.

This is intended as a general guide only. It is to supplement the information provided with your medication. Please be sure to read carefully any information provided by your pharmacist.

Feedback

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future.

Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

Further Information

Please feel free to contact the Endocrine Specialist Nurses with any questions you may have. There is an answer machine where you can leave your name and contact details. We will return all calls.

The Endocrinology Specialist Nurses:

Kerrie Grounds

Amanda Hamilton

Karen Jone

Michel Llewelyn

Blessy Yohannan

Tel: 0151 706 2417

Textphone number: 18001 0151 706 2417

Related Patient information leaflets:

Hydrocortisone replacement instructions on reducing or discontinuing therapy (PI 1020)

Hydrocortisone replacement therapy-what to do during illness and/or stress (PIF 1021)

Medical alert jewellery (some examples)

www.medicalert.org.uk

www.medicaltags.co.uk (SOS talisman)

www.theidbandco.com

There are also two particularly good patient support groups, which offer excellent advice through letters and telephone contact. They also hold local area group meetings. They are:

**The Pituitary Foundation
PO Box 1944
Bristol
BS99 2UB**

**Tel: 0117 370 1320
Email: helpline@pituitary.org.uk
www.pituitary.org.uk**

**Addison's Disease Self Help Group
Tel: 01483 830673 www.adshg.org.uk
(The advice on this website is suitable for anybody on hydrocortisone replacement, not just those with Addison's disease)**

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All Trust approved information is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages, easy read, large print, audio, Braille, moon and electronically.

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