

Living Well with Diabetes

Treating high blood sugar caused by steroid medicines

Although steroids are very helpful in treating certain conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, Crohn's disease, cancer, and inflammation, they can also make it harder for the body to use insulin effectively. This in turn can lead to a rise in blood sugar levels, known as hyperglycemia.

Insulin is the hormone made by the pancreas that moves sugar from the blood into the cells where it is used as energy. Without insulin, the body can't turn sugar into energy. Instead, the sugar builds up in the blood leading to high blood sugar. Symptoms of high blood sugar include tiredness, thirst, and increased urination. Over time, high blood sugar can lead to damaged blood vessels and other complications.

Steps you can take

If steroids are causing you to have high blood sugar readings, here are ways to take care of yourself:

- Make healthier food choices. Choose nutritious foods such as vegetables, grains, and proteins low in fat. Watch your portion sizes.
- Keep moving and get some exercise every day.
- If you're taking medicine for diabetes, take it exactly as prescribed.
- Monitor your blood sugar. For the first 48 hours after starting steroid medication, check your blood sugar before lunch or dinner and again 2 hours after you've eaten.
 - If your blood sugar is higher than 200 mg/dL on 2 occasions, contact your primary care provider or your diabetes nurse to find out what steps to take.
 - If your blood sugar values are all less than 180 mg/dL 48 hours, after starting the steroid medicine, you can return to your usual monitoring routine.
 - In addition to your regular monitoring routine, check your blood sugar 2 hours after a main meal at least twice a week for as long as you're taking the steroid medicine.

Call your doctor or nurse right away if your blood sugar is higher than 300 mg/dL at any time, and you don't feel well. After clinic hours, call the Consulting Nurse.

High blood sugars caused by steroids will most likely go away after you stop taking the steroids. In the meantime, keeping your blood sugar levels within a normal range will ensure your body has the energy and nutrients it needs to help you heal.

Consulting Nurse Service

Available to Kaiser Permanente members 24 hours a day: 1-800-297-6877