



# Brain Tumour Australia Information

## © FACT SHEET 19

### Dexamethasone

#### Dexamethasone described here as DEX

is a drug that is used to treat the swelling or oedema of the tissue that can occur in the brain due to the presence of the tumour and the treatments given for the tumour. This swelling can cause discomfort and increase other symptoms because it increases the overall pressure inside the skull. This is called intra-cranial pressure (ICP). Sometimes other steroid medications (such as prednisone) are used instead of **DEX**

#### About Dexamethasone

- Comes from a group of medications (drugs) known as 'steroids' or 'corticosteroids'.
- Usually the human body produces its own supply of steroids from a part of the body called the adrenal gland. However, when steroids are taken as medication, the body accommodates by slowing down making its own supply.

*When reducing/ceasing DEX your treating specialist will reduce the dose gradually to allow your body to resume producing its natural supply of steroids. This is known as tapering.*

#### How does it work?

- Reduces the amount of fluid found in the irregular blood vessels of the tumour.
- Leads to a reduction of the swollen area (oedema) of the normal tissue.

#### When may Dexamethasone be prescribed?

- Prior to surgery to reduce swelling in the normal tissue surrounding the tumour.
- During & after surgery to reduce swelling associated with the surgical procedure. The use of **DEX** at this time helps reduce the damage by decreasing the flow of fluid across the damaged normal blood vessels.
- To improve symptoms such as headaches, nausea, vomiting or other tumour related symptoms.
- **DEX** may also be used to reduce the swelling that Radiation Therapy as a treatment may cause.

#### Taking Dexamethasone

It is important to remember the following:

- Never discontinue steroid medication abruptly.
- Follow the medication plan in order to stimulate your body to produce its normal production of steroids.
- Follow your doctors instructions on 'tapering' (reducing) the medication.

- Sometimes it is necessary to stay on **DEX** for an indefinite period because the body can no longer produce adequate amounts of its own steroids.
- Stomach upsets may occur when taking **DEX** because of the effect on the lining of the stomach
- Your doctor may advise taking the medication with milk or food to reduce the incidents of discomfort
- Other medications may be prescribed to assist your comfort level eg. antacid medication.
- Ensure that **DEX** is not taken too late in the afternoon or at evening as this can affect sleep and agitation
- If problems occur discuss them with your treatment team and discover what other options are available.

*Remember to provide your doctor with a list of other medications that you take to assist in monitoring your treatment.*

#### Side Effects of Dexamethasone

- Your immune system may be affected when taking **DEX** so report all changes to regular function to your doctor
- Purchasing a thermometer will assist with monitoring changes in body temperature. If concerned report these changes to your doctor .
- Sore throats and mouths ('Thrush' or candida) may occur.
- Fluid retention may occur in feet, face or hands.
- Sometimes one may notice a weakness in the lower limbs and shoulders when walking up stairs, moving from sitting to standing or stretching eg. hanging washing on the line.
- Changes to sleep patterns, moods and behaviours should also be discussed with your doctor.
- Weight gain may occur due to an increase in appetite (**DEX** induced weight gain). Weight gained is usually lost after medication is ceased.
- Changes to facial appearance may occur ('a moon faced appearance' - **DEX** induced).
- Blood levels for diabetes may have to be monitored due to an increased level of blood sugar when taking **DEX**