

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

## Steroid Injections Worsen Joint Pain

*Dr. Gravesen understands that painful joints — including those in the shoulders, hands, knees, ankles and feet — are physically and emotionally draining. And don't forget those achy, debilitating spinal joints in the back! Unfortunately, millions of people make this dreadful situation worse by covering up symptoms with cortisone shots.*

### What Is Cortisone?

There are two types of cortisone: natural and synthetic. The first — a hormone produced by the adrenal glands — is vital for the proper functioning of the body, especially during times of stress.

It's the synthetic version, belonging to a group of chemicals known as corticosteroids, that Dr. Gravesen is concerned about. Marketed as DepoMedrol, Celestone and Kenalog — just to name a few — corticosteroids have no direct connection to the muscle-building *anabolic* steroids associated with weight lifting and competitive sports.

Dr. Gravesen believes in addressing pain at its source and supporting the body's natural healing ability: not relying on redirected, artificially produced versions of natural hormones. Non-pharmacological therapies for

joint pain include regularly scheduled chiropractic care, patient education, lifestyle modification, weight reduction, exercise and use of orthopedic appliances: such as walking canes.

Read on to learn more about why you should avoid cortisone shots — and instead rely on chiropractic care to address the underlying cause of spinal conditions.

### Serious Complications

In the case of back pain, cortisone is typically administered via an epidural injection to the spine. Mild to severe headache and injection-site infection are among this typically painful procedure's list of complications.

In the *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics*, researchers provided a detailed account of a 40-year-old man suffering from severe, persistent headache and vomiting

two days after an epidural steroid injection. During the procedure, doctors accidentally punctured the dura — the fibrous membrane that covers the brain and spinal cord, along with lining the skull's inner surface (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2007;30:536).

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) subsequently revealed a subdural hematoma — swelling — of the right, frontal portion of the brain. Despite the fact that the patient fully recovered after one week, this remains a scary example of what *can* go wrong.

Another study followed a patient who developed an abscess after a cervical epidural injection with a corticosteroid. The infection sparked neurological loss and required surgical intervention. While the patient's doctors noted that cervical epidural abscess is rare, they agreed that it remains a "potentially devastating complication after epidural steroid injection." (*Spine* 2004;29:7-9.)

Researchers also note that additional side effects associated with cortisone injections may include:

- ✓ Rupturing of tendons
- ✓ Infection
- ✓ Allergic reactions
- ✓ Local bleeding
- ✓ Skin discoloration

And, patients with renal insufficiency and severe hypertension (high blood pressure) should particularly avoid using synthetic cortisone and its related family of drugs (*J Am Geriatr Soc* 2002;50:1733-6).



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## Long-Term Complications

Even if you don't have short-term complications from a steroid injection, these shots can have long-term health effects. Read on to find out more.

### **Blocked Pain Signals**

Synthetic cortisone creates a communication breakdown within the body by blocking vital pain signals from the brain. However, it is important to note that the absence of pain does not mean the absence of injury. Because cortisone blocks pain receptors, mild to moderate joint degeneration can escalate into serious injury.

In contrast, doctors of chiropractic work to increase joint mobility and function with safe, gentle maneuvers known as **chiropractic adjustments**. Chiropractors also use exercise, nutrition and other all-natural modalities to mediate joint pain

### **Weakened Bones, Ligaments & Tendons**

Studies show synthetic cortisone weakens tendons if injected directly into their dense fibrous connective tissue. Cortisone can also soften cartilage when injected into a joint. According to researchers at the Cleveland Clinic, located in Cleveland, Ohio, "Excessively frequent, repeated injections into the same area can cause the bone, ligaments and tendons to weaken." (*J Am Geriatr Soc* 2002;50:1733-6.)

### **Lower Immune Function**

In animal research, scientists have discovered that "corticosteroids cause dose dependent suppressive effects on immune function." How? By restricting antibody production.

A similar phenomenon probably takes place in humans. Chiropractic care, on the other hand, boosts immune function by promoting optimal spinal health, nutrition, exercise and stress reduction.

## Joint Degeneration & Arthritis

Repeated injections of synthetic steroids may *speed* the process of joint deterioration, according to experts from the Marshall University Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine — a classic example of the "cure" being worse than the disease.

Long-term use of prednisone and cortisone is also linked to the development of osteoarthritis, say researchers from the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.

In fact, up to 50 percent of those undergoing long-term administration of these — and similar — drugs develop a fracture resulting from drug-induced osteoporosis, which, according to researchers, is "perhaps the most common and devastating effect." (*J Musculoskel Med* 2002;19:96-109.)

How do corticosteroids spark osteoarthritis and osteoporosis? By "decreasing bone formation and increasing bone resorption," explain scientists (*Schweiz Rundsch Med Prax* 2004;93:407-14).

### **Vision Problems**

"Ocular complications have been well documented, secondary to intravenous [injected], inhaled, oral and topical corticosteroids. The incidence of cataract is related to the dose and duration of treatment." (*Indian J Ophthalmol* 2006;54:N/A.)

In addition to cataract, glaucoma is another concern. "Cortisone glaucoma is a secondary glaucoma induced by local [injected] or oral steroids used to treat chronic inflammatory diseases." (*J Fr Ophthalmol* 2007;30:49-52.)

Worse yet, the researchers note that "Cortisone glaucoma is a serious complication of steroid therapy that usually affects young adults. The disease is usually detected late, explaining the severe functional damage."

## No-Shot Zone

Make your joints a no-shots zone when it comes to corticosteroids or any other injected substance designed to reduce joint pain.

The key is to focus on prevention: Regular chiropractic care wards off joint pain before the onset of symptoms. When pain does occur, chiropractic can hasten healing with an all-natural strategy, free of the side effects of potentially hazardous medication.

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