

Steroids in Chronic Lung Disease (CLD)

What is Chronic Lung Disease?

Chronic Lung Disease (CLD) is a general term used to describe the long-term lung damage that occurs in some premature babies. It is also sometimes known as Bronchopulmonary Dysplasia (BPD). Damage occurs because immature, fragile lungs can easily become inflamed and scarred. Premature babies who develop CLD often need more help with their breathing than babies with healthy lungs. This may mean being on a ventilator and/or in oxygen for several weeks.

How can steroids help?

Steroids are medicines which are sometimes used to prevent and treat lung problems in premature babies. For example, steroid injections are given to mothers who are likely to deliver prematurely to try and mature the baby's lungs and prevent respiratory problems. Steroids can also be given after birth when a premature baby has developed CLD. They act by reducing the inflammation in the lung.

What are the specific benefits of steroid therapy?

Reducing inflammation helps to improve lung function in babies with CLD. Steroids have been shown to help babies to get off the ventilator ('be extubated') and to allow them to be treated with less oxygen. We hope that this will allow a baby's lungs to heal more quickly than if they remained on a ventilator and in high levels of oxygen.

Side effects of steroid therapy

All medicines have some side effects. Steroids are potentially powerful drugs but also have important side effects. Some of these side effects (such as poor growth, raised blood pressure and high blood sugar levels) are relatively minor and easily corrected once the steroid treatment is completed.

However, the long-term side effects are more significant and generally cause more concern. In babies with CLD, treatment with steroids may be linked with problems with brain development later in childhood. This may show itself as weakness or stiffness of one or more limbs and/or as slower development compared to other children of the same age. Overall, this means that although babies treated with steroids tend to have fewer problems with their lungs they may be at greater risk of later problems with brain development.

Which babies are given steroids?

Most babies with CLD do not need steroids, even if they remain on a ventilator for a long time. Steroids are only used to treat babies with severe, life-threatening lung problems. The decision to use steroids is made by the Consultant in charge of the Neonatal Unit. They will decide whether a baby is sick enough to be considered for treatment and will weigh up the risks and benefits of using steroids. Parents are always kept up to date about the management of their baby and will be fully involved in any decisions about using steroids.

Where can I get more information about steroids in Chronic Lung Disease?

The nurses and doctors looking after your baby will be able to tell you more about steroids. There is another information leaflet just about 'Chronic Lung Disease'.

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