

Glucocorticoid: Avoid This Popular Pet Drug Until You Learn Its Shocking Side Effects

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By Dr. Becker

Many veterinarians and experienced pet guardians have a love-hate relationship with steroid (glucocorticoid) therapy for dogs and cats. There are a number of synthetically produced glucocorticoids available. They typically have names ending in "-sone" -- names like prednisone, prednisolone, dexamethasone and betamethasone.

On the positive side, these drugs are extremely effective at treating a wide range of symptoms, from itchy skin to the painful and debilitating inflammation associated with serious diseases like cancer. But the downside of synthetic steroid hormones is they have a very long list of side effects, some of which can, over time, create more serious health problems than the problem they were prescribed to treat.

Why Pets Are Prescribed Steroid Therapy

Pets receiving steroids most often have an inflammatory condition ending in "-itis", including dermatitis (inflammation of the skin), enteritis (inflammation of the small intestine), and colitis (inflammation of the colon).

Another reason for steroid use in veterinary medicine is to intentionally suppress an animal's immune system to treat an autoimmune disorder. If your pet's immune system goes into overdrive to the point of attacking itself, your dog or cat has what is called an immune-mediated or autoimmune disease. In such cases, steroids are often prescribed in very high doses to shut the immune system down entirely. The hope is that at the end of the steroid therapy, the immune system will reset itself to a balanced state.

A dog or cat with a GI tract disorder falling into the general category of [inflammatory bowel disease](#) (IBD) is often prescribed steroids, as are animals with allergies, inflamed gums or eyes, and asthma or another upper respiratory condition.

Another use for steroids is in some types of cancer – lymphoma and [mast cell cancer](#), for example. These cancers cause massive inflammation and veterinarians routinely prescribe steroids.

An uncommon, but important use of glucocorticoids is to treat an emergency, for instance brain swelling as the result of head trauma, or to jumpstart an animal's circulatory system to prevent shock. These life-or-death emergencies are situations in which veterinarians and pet owner are truly thankful to have steroids available.

Glucocorticoids Have a Long List of Side Effects, Many of Them Serious

Common side effects of glucocorticoid drugs include increased hunger and thirst, increased urination, lethargy, restlessness, mental confusion (sometimes called "pred head"), GI problems including ulcers, hair loss, weight gain, a potbelly that often signals the presence of Cushing's disease, blood clots, diabetes, [pancreatitis](#), and secondary infections.

Perhaps my greatest concern about the routine use of steroids is that the underlying condition causing your pet's symptoms, which is typically [inflammation](#), is left untreated. Unaddressed inflammation in the body increases the risk for serious disease, including cancer.

Many pet owners are willing to deal with the milder side effects of steroid therapy because the drugs are so effective at suppressing uncomfortable symptoms. Often, pet owners have already tried several other approaches without much success. Their dog or cat is still suffering, and they feel frustrated and helpless. Under those circumstances, steroids can seem like miracle drugs.

Many veterinarians also like glucocorticoids because, frankly, the drugs make them look good. Within a day or so (depending on the method of administration), the pet feels better, the owner is relieved, and symptom suppression can last for weeks to months. The drugs are also inexpensive and convenient, especially when compared with the time and expense involved in looking for the root cause of an animal's symptoms and working (often through trial and error) to resolve it.

However, long term or overuse of these drugs virtually guarantees that an animal will develop significant organ disease or dysfunction. Veterinary practices that routinely use glucocorticoids have a higher than average number of pet patients with diabetes, liver disease, pancreatitis, drug-resistant infections, and other serious diseases. And to make matters worse, often no connection is made between steroid use and the increased incidence of life-threatening disease.

This is especially disturbing in cases where the pet's condition could have been effectively managed and often resolved without resorting to the use of steroids. For example, most skin conditions can be successfully treated with a non-toxic protocol. Stopping your dog's or cat's itching quickly and cheaply is wonderful, but it certainly isn't worth the risk of destroying your pet's opportunity for a long, healthy life.

Before You Agree to Steroid Treatments for Your Pet

When your pet has a health challenge, the goal should be to identify and treat the root cause while relieving symptoms with non-toxic therapies.

Natural alternatives to glucocorticoids exist, but unfortunately, only certain holistic and integrative veterinarians are familiar with them. For example, I use [plant-derived sterols and sterolins](#) instead of synthetic steroid hormones. When I'm dealing with inflammatory conditions, I also use proteolytic enzymes, homeopathics, Chinese herbs, and acupuncture.

If your pet has allergies, as so many dogs and cats these days do, I strongly encourage you to try to determine the allergic triggers. Is it her [diet](#)? Are there GMOs in her food? Is it a toxin in her environment, perhaps a household cleaner? If her skin is red and itchy, what's causing it?

Uncovering allergic triggers can be a tedious, frustrating undertaking – but it's the only way to get to the source of your pet's problem and eliminate it. If you're lucky, you may discover the allergen right away – some are more obvious than others. Think about everywhere your pet goes, everything she ingests, and everything she touches or that touches her. Sometimes an answer jumps right out at you, other times it can take a long process of elimination to get to the root cause of an allergic response.

In my experience, an over-stimulated immune system, of which allergies are a symptom, is often the result of over-vaccination. Too many unnecessary vaccines can make your pet's immune system overactive, so I recommend asking your veterinarian for titers to identify which, if any, vaccines your dog or cat requires.

Under certain circumstances, but much less often than the current trend of overuse, steroid therapy for a pet is necessary and advisable, for example, in cases of acute head trauma or immune-mediated diseases. But regardless of why the drug is being given, it's important to insure your dog or cat isn't receiving steroid treatment for extended periods of time, or repeatedly, or for symptoms of an unknown underlying condition.