What are steroids?
Steroids (or corticosteroids) are produced naturally in the body by adrenal glands. They are given as medication to replace or increase the body’s supply of steroids. They reduce inflammation and allergic symptoms. They have been used for over 50 years.

For respiratory diseases, they are usually taken in tablet form, but can also be taken intravenously or directly into muscle. This leaflet does NOT apply to inhaled steroids. Common forms of steroid tablet include prednisolone, dexamethasone, deflazacort and hydrocortisone.

What are they used for?
In respiratory disease, they are used in two ways – short-term and long-term therapy.
- **Short-term** – A short course of steroids (5-14 days) will be used to treat a worsening of asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. These can usually be stopped suddenly.
- **Long-term** – Courses over two weeks, sometimes continuing for many months or even years, are usually prescribed to treat inflammation in the chest such as fibrosis, vasculitis, sarcoidosis, allergic disorders or chronic severe asthma. Longer courses of steroids cannot be stopped immediately and need to be reduced according to instructions from your doctor.

When used appropriately, steroids are powerful drugs that can treat many serious diseases.

Before taking steroids.
Make sure your doctor knows if you:
- have diabetes mellitus or glaucoma (including a family history)
- have had a recent heart attack, high blood pressure, epilepsy, liver or kidney problems
- have had tuberculosis or any significant contact with tuberculosis
- suffer from osteoporosis or if you are a woman who has gone through the menopause
- have mood disorders (particularly a history of steroid-induced psychosis)
- suffer or have ever suffered from peptic ulcer disease
- are attempting pregnancy, pregnant or breast-feeding
- have recently had a vaccination or about to have one. ‘Flu vaccination is safe for patients on steroids
- have never had chickenpox or measles

When and how do I take steroids?
- Take the medication as prescribed by your doctor. This will usually be once a day in the morning, with or after food.
- NEVER stop taking steroids without first speaking to your doctor
- Enteric-coated tablets must be swallowed whole (not chewed or crushed). Do not take indigestion remedies at the same time as enteric-coated tablets.
- When taking steroids, you should carry a Steroid Card, which keeps a record of your dose and duration of steroid treatment.

What dose do I take?
Your doctor will advise you about the dose. If taking a short course the dose will usually be high for up to 14 days. If taking a longer course then you will usually start on a high dose and gradually
reduce as your symptoms improve. You should not stop your tablets unless advised by your doctor as this can be very dangerous. You may need to continue a small dose of steroids long term. If you become unwell your doctor may need to increase your steroid dose.

**How should I store steroids?**
Store at room temperature and protect from humidity (do not store in a bathroom or kitchen). Make sure that you do not risk running out of steroids.

**What are the possible side effects?**
All drugs can cause side-effects. With steroids, these become more likely at higher doses taken for longer periods and therefore your doctor will aim to keep the dose and duration to a minimum.

Common side effects include weight gain, high blood pressure, round face, thinning of skin, easy bruising, indigestion and changes in mood. Blood sugar may rise and diabetes may develop. In currently diabetic patients, glucose-lowering medication will usually need to be increased or changed. Long-term use steroids can also cause or worsen glaucoma, cataracts and osteoporosis (thinning of bones). If you need to take steroids for more than a few weeks, your doctor will probably prescribe ‘bone-protection’ drugs that help prevent osteoporosis.

Steroids can make you more prone to infection as well as masking the usual symptoms and signs of infection. If you become unwell or develop a temperature while taking steroids, you should report to your doctor immediately. If you have not had Chickenpox or measles and become exposed to someone with either, you should also report to your doctor immediately.

If you develop any new symptoms after starting steroids, you should consult your doctor.

**What should I monitor?**
You do not need to perform any regular monitoring unless suggested specifically by your doctor. However, you should see you doctor regularly to monitor your weight, blood pressure and blood sugar level.

**Do steroids interfere with any other medications?**
You should always give a full list of your medications (including over-the-counter and herbal remedies) to your doctor. Steroids can be taken with most other medications. Never take any over-the-counter medicines without informing the pharmacist of your full list of medication.

You should avoid live vaccinations, such as polio and rubella (German measles). However, flu vaccines and pneumovax are safe.

**Can I drink alcohol?**
Yes, but alcohol should be taken in moderation.

**Can I take steroids in pregnancy or when breast-feeding?**
Although it is not ideal to be taking steroids during pregnancy, they are often safer than other drugs and it is better to keep the underlying disease controlled. Steroids are not known to cause congenital abnormalities. If you are planning pregnancy or are breast-feeding, you should discuss this with your doctor.

**What if I take an overdose of steroids?**
If you take an overdose of steroids, contact your doctor. Always take the container with you, if possible, even if empty.
What if I miss a dose?
If it is nearly time for the next dose then leave it out and take the next dose at the normal time. Do not take double the dose to make up for missed doses.

How should I stop steroids?
If you have been taking steroids for longer than 14 days, you should never stop your steroids abruptly. Always discuss stopping your steroids with your doctor.

REMEMBER
- Always carry your Steroid Card.
- Never stop steroids abruptly.
- Never give your medication to others even if their condition and medication appears to be the same as yours.
- Keep all medicines out of reach of children.