



# What to Eat While Taking Steroids

Your child may need to take steroids. Here are tips on how to deal with some of the side effects of taking steroids.

Steroids, also called corticosteroids, may be prescribed by your child's doctor for many reasons. While steroids are helpful in treating medical conditions, side effects are common. Listed below are some of the ways steroids can interfere with your child's nutrition and food intake.

## What are the nutrition-related side effects of steroids?

- Weakening of the bones
- Muscle weakness and muscle loss
- Keeping too much fluid and salt in the body
- Increased hunger and weight gain
- Upset stomach
- Increases in blood sugar

## Weakening of your child's bones

Steroids can weaken bones, especially around the joints (hips, knees and shoulders). This can make your child's bones more likely to break (fracture) and cause wear and tear in their joints. People who take high doses of steroids for many months or years are at the highest risk for weakened bones.

## What can we do to help prevent weakened bones?

Eating foods that are high in calcium, like dairy products, can help prevent this side effect. Calcium helps to keep your child's bones strong. Vitamin D, which is also found in dairy foods, helps the body move calcium into the bones. Regular physical activity can also help to prevent bones from getting weaker.

The table below lists the amounts of calcium your child should have while they are on steroid therapy and the minimum amount of vitamin D. The amounts are listed by age. Your child may need more vitamin D if they have a low blood level. Talk to your child's doctor about drawing a vitamin D level to determine whether additional supplementation is needed. Your child's dietitian can help you to increase the amount of calcium in their diet and decide whether a calcium and/or vitamin supplement is needed.

### Recommended amounts of calcium and vitamin D for children on steroid therapy

Age	Milligrams (mg) of calcium needed per day	International Units (IU) of vitamin D needed per day (minimum)
Birth to 6 months	400 mg	400 IU
6-12 months	600 mg	400 IU
1 to 3 years	1000 mg	600 IU
4 to 8 years	1200 mg	600 IU
9 to 18 years	1,500 mg	600 IU
19 to 30 years	1,500 mg	600 IU

### Muscle loss

Steroid use can lead to muscle weakness and muscle loss. Eating foods high in protein can help lessen this side effect. Regular physical activity can also help prevent muscle loss and weakness.

### Swollen or puffy face or body

Steroids can make your child look swollen or puffy. This is caused by their body holding onto extra water and salt. It will help if they avoid foods that are high in salt (sodium) and do not add salt to their food. Your child's dietitian can help with food choices and advise you on how much liquid your child needs to drink.

### Increased hunger and weight gain

Your child may feel more hungry than usual while taking steroids. They may want foods at unusual times of the day and night. Try to have them eat healthy meals and snacks and avoid foods that are high in salt and sugar. Also, try to have your child do some physical activity each day.

### Upset stomach

Steroids may cause an upset stomach or heartburn. Please talk with your child's doctor and dietitian if your child is getting an upset stomach. Your child's doctor may give medicine to help your child lower their stomach acid.

### To Learn More

- Your child's dietitian:

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- Nutrition  
206-987-4758
- Ask your child's nurse or doctor
- [www.seattlechildrens.org](http://www.seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

### Increased blood sugar

Taking steroids can cause the amount of sugar (glucose) in your child's blood to become higher than normal. Signs that your child's sugar levels are high include:

- Feeling more thirsty than usual
- Peeing (urinating) more often
- Blurry vision
- Feeling dizzy or extra tired

Your child's doctor will check your child's blood sugar with their other lab tests. If your child has high blood sugar, your child may need to avoid foods that have lots of sugar, like candy, juice and soda. Some people may need to use insulin, a medicine that helps lower blood sugar.

### Other side effects of steroids

- Increased lipid levels
- Rounding or filling out of the face
- Slowed growth and delayed puberty
- Mood swings
- Acne and skin changes
- Risk of infection
- Slow wound healing
- High blood pressure

Talk to your child's health care provider if your child is having any of these side effects.

### Eat right to help with side effects

Side effects of medicines can be confusing and hard. Your child's dietitian can help you with choosing foods to reduce some side effects and to keep your child growing healthy and strong. We have more information on low sodium, high calcium and healthy food choices through Clinical Nutrition Services.