MEDICATION INFORMATION

Intranasal Steroid Sprays

Steroid medications, also known as corticosteroids, are a class of drugs which act by decreasing swelling, irritation, and inflammation. They are available in nasal spray form and can often be quite effective for treatment of allergic rhinitis (hay fever), nasal polyps, and other types of nasal irritation. Flonase, Nasacort AQ, Nasonex, Omnicaps, Rhinocort AQ, and Veramyst are examples of topical intranasal corticosteroids. They vary somewhat in their odor, mode of administration, characteristics of spray, and other physical factors. Each is effective, and the differences are somewhat a matter of individual preference. Flonase is currently available as a generic form (fluticasone).

Unlike over-the-counter decongestant sprays (e.g., Afrin, Neo-Synephrine, etc.), nasal steroid sprays do not offer immediate relief of symptoms. If decongestant sprays are used for a long time, however, symptoms may worsen, and people sometimes feel dependent on them. Unlike over-the-counter nasal decongestant sprays, however, nasal steroids produce no “rebound” increase in congestion. As a result, they do not have the potential for dependence often occurring with the decongestant preparations.

Topical nasal steroid medications are most effective when used on a regular schedule. Recent studies have shown, however, that in some cases there may be modest benefit even when they are used on an as-needed basis. In fact, although maximum improvement from these medications may not be evident for a week or two, some improvement is often noted in less than 24 hours. Doses, as in the case of other steroid medications, should be reduced to the smallest amount necessary to continue the improvement which had developed with the starting doses.

These topical nasal steroid sprays are used both for allergic and non-allergic nasal congestion (rhinitis). They also may be helpful for individuals with chronic or recurrent nasal polyps or sinus disease. They do not seem to be effective for the common cold and generally should not be introduced for treatment of cold symptoms.

Intranasal steroids are usually well tolerated, but some side effects can include mild nasal bleeding, discomfort, dryness, and headaches. These problems are usually less frequent with the newer preparations. These medications should be used only as directed. When overused, intranasal steroid medications may cause damage to the nasal septum (e.g., perforation). To minimize this possibility, it is recommended that you avoid spraying this medication directly toward the middle (nasal septum) of your nose. Use of a salt water (saline) nasal spray preceding the nasal steroid often helps to relieve some of the discomfort when this is a problem. Routine follow-up is advised when nasal steroids are being taken on a regular or maintenance basis.
Oral corticosteroids or steroid medications have been associated with both mild and serious side effects. These adverse effects include weight gain, increase in appetite, diabetes, high blood pressure, bone disorders, growth problems, and cataracts, among others. These side effects are typically not seen in patients using topical nasal steroid sprays. Recent studies, however, suggest a theoretical potential for some steroid absorption. This should be kept in mind, particularly as many individuals using nasal steroids also take orally inhaled steroids for asthma control. An additive effect between these two inhaled steroid medications may occur. Patients on nasal steroid sprays should be seen regularly to monitor decreases in doses if appropriate, and for routine evaluation. Although debatable, some physicians feel nasal steroids may be contraindicated if you have glaucoma or a strong family history of this problem. We suggest that you discuss this consideration with your ophthalmologist (eye doctor) in the event of such a history.

Notify your doctor if you develop nasal irritation, excessive nosebleeds, or headache, especially if these symptoms coincide with the time of administration of topical nasal steroid medications.

These are general guidelines. Other side effects may occasionally occur. Always notify your doctor if you experience adverse effects which seem to correlate with taking medication or if you have not responded well to the treatment prescribed. Use of these medications should be discussed if you become pregnant, are breastfeeding, or develop any new medical condition after they are prescribed.