

Hydrocortisone

Information for patients and families

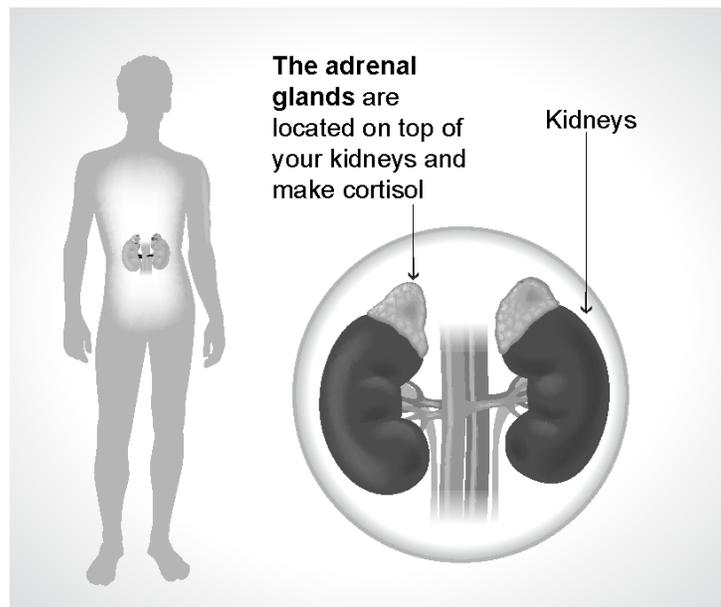
St. Michael's

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Your doctor has prescribed hydrocortisone to treat adrenal insufficiency.

What is adrenal insufficiency?

Adrenal insufficiency means that your adrenal glands are not working well. The adrenal glands produce an important hormone called cortisol. Cortisol helps all of your body's systems work normally. It also helps your body respond to stresses that challenge its normal functioning, such as when you get sick or have surgery. If you have adrenal insufficiency, the adrenal glands do not make enough cortisol.



When your adrenal glands do not make enough cortisol, your body cannot respond to stress as well. In mild cases, you may experience tiredness, low appetite, nausea and weight loss. In more severe cases, adrenal insufficiency can cause pain in your abdomen or lower back, vomiting, low blood pressure, fainting and even death. A severe case of adrenal insufficiency is called an adrenal crisis.

How is adrenal insufficiency treated?

You will take pills to replace the cortisol that your adrenal glands are not making. You will take the pills 2 times each day. The amount is adjusted for each patient.

Your dose of hydrocortisone (Cortef®) **each day** is:

_____ mg when you wake up

and

_____ mg 6-8 hours later

What side effects may happen and what should I do?

The amount of hydrocortisone you are taking is meant to replace the amount of cortisol your body should be producing. You may have:

- Mild stomach upset - If this happens, take your hydrocortisone with food or milk
- Trouble sleeping at night - If this happens, take your second dose of hydrocortisone 1 to 2 hours earlier

If your dose of hydrocortisone is too high, the side effects can be:

- High blood pressure
- A puffy face
- Gaining weight
- Thin skin
- Bruising easily
- High blood sugar
- Weakened bones
- Changes in your mood

If you have any of these side effects, talk to your doctor. They may need to change your dose.

Never stop taking this medicine or reduce the dose by yourself. This could cause an adrenal crisis. If you have concerns with your medicine, talk to your doctor.

Do I need a higher dose when I am under more stress?

Yes. When you have more stress, your body needs more hydrocortisone.

If you have...	Take...
Minimal stress, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cough with no fever• A routine visit to the dentist• A skin biopsy	Usual dose of hydrocortisone
Minor illness, such as a <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cold with fever• Chest infection• Urinary tract infection	2 times your usual hydrocortisone dose for a few days. When you feel better, go back to your usual dose.
Dental work done using a local anesthetic that lasts more than 1 hour	On the day of the procedure, take 3 times your usual hydrocortisone dose. The next day, go back to your usual dose.
Any surgery, done under either local or general anesthetic	Ask your doctor. You may need intravenous hydrocortisone.
Accident causing a broken bone or major trauma	Ask your doctor. You may need intravenous hydrocortisone.
Serious illnesses such as <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vomiting• Diarrhea• Pneumonia• Kidney infection• Heart attack	Seek medical attention. You will need intravenous hydrocortisone.

Should I get a MedicAlert bracelet?

Yes. If you have a serious accident or illness and cannot speak for yourself, a MedicAlert bracelet lets others know that you need hydrocortisone. You can order a bracelet at your pharmacy or online at www.medicalert.ca. Your bracelet should say “treated for adrenal insufficiency”.

It is also a good idea to keep a card in your wallet that says, “Being treated for adrenal insufficiency.” Your doctor can give you a card.

What if I cannot get to a hospital for intravenous hydrocortisone?

If you travel abroad or to somewhere remote, you may not be able to get intravenous hydrocortisone in case of a serious illness. To be prepared for these situations, you must bring your own injectable hydrocortisone. Ask your doctor for a prescription. Before you travel, learn how to use your injection.

Follow these steps:

1. Ask your doctor for the prescription. Then ask your doctor to teach you how to give yourself an intramuscular injection
2. At least a month before your trip, get your prescription filled at a pharmacy. The medicine you are getting is called hydrocortisone sodium succinate (Solu-Cortef[®] Act-o-Vial)
3. You will also need to get:
 - 3mL syringes for injection
 - 21G or 23G needles
 - Alcohol wipes
4. Check your supply of injectable hydrocortisone regularly. Make sure it is not expired.

If you need to give yourself an injection of hydrocortisone when you are travelling, get medical attention as soon as possible afterwards. You will need further treatment.

What about pregnancy?

Speak to your doctor if you are pregnant or are planning to get pregnant. It is safe to take hydrocortisone during pregnancy. Your dose may need to be adjusted as your pregnancy progresses. When you are giving birth, you will also need intravenous hydrocortisone.

What else should I know?

Other medicines can affect how well hydrocortisone works in your body. Always tell your doctor about all of the medicines you are taking, including any over-the-counter or natural products.

St. Michael's cares about your health. For reliable health information, visit our Patient and Family Learning Centre, or find us online at wwwstmichaelshospital.com/learn

This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Ask your healthcare provider about this information if you have questions.