Title: Shingles and Steroids: What You Need to Know

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Date: November 4, 2009

Key words: Herpes zoster and corticosteroids

Abstract: Herpes Zoster is a painful infection with both acute and chronic phases of pain. Oral corticosteroids decrease the length of acute neuritis, but do not decrease the incidence of post herpetic neuralgia. Furthermore, the risk of corticosteroids is higher than the clinical benefit. Strength of Recommendation: A, level 1, high quality individual RCT.

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Current Recommendations

It is not recommended at this time to take oral steroids as part of the treatment for shingles because they do not decrease chronic pain and may cause potentially significant side effects to the patient.

Resources

Introduction

Shingles, or herpes zoster, is a disease caused by a virus called Varicella-Zoster. This is the same virus that causes chickenpox. If you have had chickenpox, the virus stays in your body and may not cause problems until many years later when the virus reappears as shingles. Unlike chickenpox, you cannot catch shingles from someone who has it around you.

Shingles

The symptoms of shingles include tingling or burning pain, usually on only one side of the body. The pain can be severe. Blisters form that can last as long as 14 days. Shingles that appears on the face may affect your vision or hearing. The pain of shingles may last for weeks, months or even years after the blisters have healed. This chronic pain is referred to as postherpetic neuralgia.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is no cure for shingles. Medicines that fight the virus may help when given just after symptoms appear. These medicines may also help prevent the chronic pain from developing. There has been controversy over whether oral steroids taken short term should be a part of the treatment of shingles.

What are Steroids?

Steroids used in medicine - sometimes called corticosteroids - treat a variety of problems. These steroids are similar to hormones that your own adrenal glands produce in response to stress associated with illnesses and injury. They reduce inflammation and affect the immune system. Some studies have shown that taking oral steroids may reduce pain at the start of shingles. However, they do not decrease chronic pain and they can cause significant harm.

What are the Side effects?

Oral corticosteroids affect your entire body and are more likely to cause significant side effects than steroids that are inhaled or applied to the skin. Side effects typically depend on the dose of steroid you are taking.

Side effects within days to weeks of steroid therapy:

* elevated pressure in the eyes (glaucoma)
* water retention, swelling in the legs
* increased blood pressure
* mood swings
* weight gain