



Having a steroid injection in the hand

You have been referred to the hand and wrist clinic where you may be offered a steroid injection. This leaflet explains what having a steroid injection entails and the risks involved.

What are steroids?

Steroids, also called corticosteroids, are anti-inflammatory medicines used to relieve symptoms of pain, swelling and triggering. They can be used to treat many conditions around the hand, such as arthritis, trigger finger, carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis, and are best administered via an injection into the affected area. The effects of the steroid injections can last from weeks to months and for some people, can even be permanent, but this will vary from individual to individual and depends on the cause of your symptoms.

What can I expect afterwards?

Often the steroid is injected with a combination of local anaesthetic, which has numbing properties. The anaesthetic will wear off within a few hours, and most people have increased pain during and for a few days after the injection. This is because an injection of fluid into a tight space always increases the pressure, and this causes pain. Pain can usually be managed with simple painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Occasionally, the pain is very severe and this is known as a 'steroid flare'. Steroid flares take several days to settle and can be very uncomfortable, but do not cause major harm.

What are the complications?

Whilst the vast majority of injections cause no problems, there are a few risks to be aware of:

- **Skin / fat necrosis:** In some patients, the skin or fat next to the site of injection breaks down and can make the area look abnormal, with discolouration of the skin and a hollow appearance to the underlying fat. This usually resolves within 6-12 months but occasionally persists for longer.
- **Infection:** This is a very unusual complication of steroid injection, but one that is very serious, and requires urgent attention. Symptoms of infection are redness, increasing pain and temperature, with loss of function. If you experience these symptoms, please contact us urgently or alternatively you should attend your GP or the A&E Department. Infection can result in significant and sometimes a very serious loss of function.
- **Tendon rupture:** Although very rare, tendon rupture is occasionally seen following a steroid injection. This is more likely if the injection has been given for trigger finger rather than arthritis. This complication may require an operation to regain function, but some permanent functional loss may occur.

- **Artery or nerve damage:** Very rarely, the injection can accidentally go into an artery or nerve. Injection of steroid directly into an artery can cause thrombosis (blocking) of the artery, and potentially cause gangrene of the affected finger or thumb. Injection directly into a nerve will damage the nerve tissue and can produce loss of sensation and chronic pain from the nerve.
- **Altered blood sugars:** This is particularly applies to patients with diabetes. Steroid injections can raise the blood sugar (glucose) levels. It is therefore vital that you regularly monitor your blood sugar levels following a steroid injection, and if you take insulin, you change the dose accordingly.
- **Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS):** CRPS is a rare but very serious complication following surgery to the hand or arm, affecting 1 in every 10 000 patients. It causes pain and increased sensitivity, swelling and stiffness in the hand. It can be treated with physiotherapy and medical therapy but it can take up to two years to improve. Long term disability is common following this complication.

When can I drive and return back to work?

This depends on the site and number of injections you are having. For office work, most people are comfortable enough to drive home and return to work the next day. Very manual jobs may require a few days for the pain and swelling to settle.

Further information

The British Society for Surgery of the Hand (BSSH) <https://www.bssh.ac.uk/patients/>

The Royal College of Surgeons of England have some patient information publications available on their website www.rcseng.ac.uk/patient-information

Contacting us

If you require any information or advice from the Hand Therapy Team, you can contact us at the Royal Berkshire Hospital during office hours Monday to Friday via the Clinical Administration Team (CAT 5): 0118 322 7415 or email rbb-tr.cat5@nhs.net.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Hand Clinic, Orthopaedics, February 2024

Next review due: February 2026