

Should dexamethasone be used for COVID-19?

This clinical evidence summary outlines existing evidence on the use of dexamethasone as a potential treatment for patients with COVID-19. The information may be revised as new evidence emerges. The summary is not exhaustive of the subject matter and does not replace clinical judgement. The responsibility for making decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual patient remains at all times with the healthcare professional.

Background

Recently, online news articles have cited that dexamethasone may be the first drug to reduce mortality in critically ill patients with COVID-19 infection^{1,2}, however, local experts have also cautioned against widespread use until detailed data are published in a peer-reviewed journal³.

Dexamethasone is a corticosteroid that has been used since the 1960s to reduce inflammation. It is included in the World Health Organization (WHO) Essential Medicines List⁴ and is approved by regulatory agencies (including US FDA, EMA and HSA) for a range of conditions, including adrenocortical insufficiency, inflammatory disorders, cancer and shock.

The full spectrum of COVID-19 infection ranges from asymptomatic disease to mild respiratory tract illness to severe pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), multiorgan failure, and death. Clinical presentation of some critically ill patients with COVID-19 suggest a “Cytokine Storm Syndrome” or hyperinflammatory state in which the immunosuppressive effects of corticosteroids may be beneficial⁵.

Corticosteroids were widely used during outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), however, their efficacy has been controversial, largely based on observational studies with conflicting results^{6,7}. Taken together with data showing that corticosteroids delay viral clearance and increase bacterial/fungal superinfections, most guidelines do not recommend the routine use of corticosteroids unless clinically indicated⁸⁻¹¹.

Clinical evidence

Published evidence for dexamethasone to treat COVID-19 is limited, however, preliminary findings from the RECOVERY trial suggest that it reduces mortality in patients with severe disease¹².

RECOVERY is a large, multicentre, open-label, randomised controlled trial (RCT) conducted in the United Kingdom to assess a range of treatments for patients hospitalised with COVID-19. Over 11,500 patients have been enrolled in the trial, of which 2104 patients have been randomised to receive dexamethasone 6 mg orally or intravenously for 10 days. On June 16, 2020, a press release on the preliminary findings from the trial suggested that dexamethasone reduced the risk of 28-day mortality by 35% in patients requiring ventilator support (rate ratio, RR 0.65; 95% CI, 0.48 to 0.88; $p=0.0003$) and by 20% in patients receiving oxygen (RR 0.80; 95% CI, 0.67 to 0.96; $p=0.0021$) compared with the usual care control group. Of note, no benefit was seen in patients not requiring respiratory support (RR 1.22; 95% CI, 0.86 to 1.75; $p=0.14$)¹². Publication of the study results is currently pending.

The effects of dexamethasone in ARDS have been assessed in a multicentre RCT which included 277 patients with non-COVID-19 related moderate to severe ARDS. Patients were randomised to receive routine care or intravenous dexamethasone 20 mg once daily from day 1 to 5, followed by 10 mg once daily from day 6 to 10. Patients in both groups were also on mechanical ventilator support. Results showed that patients in the dexamethasone group had more ventilator-free days compared to the control group (difference 4.8 days; 95% CI, 2.57 to 7.03; $p<0.0001$) and lower all-cause 60-day mortality (21% versus 36%; difference -15.3%; 95% CI, -25.9 to -4.9; $p=0.0047$). The incidence of adverse events did not differ significantly between treatment groups. However, as there was substantial heterogeneity in terms of ARDS aetiology (~ 50% caused by pneumonia), generalisability

of these results to COVID-19 patients with ARDS may be limited. In addition, the trial had strict inclusion criteria, excluding 73% of eligible patients because of pre-existing comorbidities¹³.

Several other international trials of dexamethasone for treating COVID-19 have been registered and are in planning or active recruitment stages with data anticipated to mature in the near future (Table 1).

Table 1: Studies registered internationally for dexamethasone in patients with COVID-19

Study identifier	Study Design	Intervention	Comparator(s)	Date of primary completion
NCT04381936 ¹⁴ EudraCT 2020-001113-21 ¹⁵ (RECOVERY)	MC*, OL, pII/III, randomised, factorial assignment	6 intervention groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dexamethasone (low dose) • Lopinavir-ritonavir • Azithromycin • Convalescent plasma • Tocilizumab • Hydroxychloroquine 	Standard of care	December 2020
NCT04325061 ¹⁶ EudraCT 2020-001278-31 ¹⁷ (DEXA-COVID19)	MC [^] , OL, pIV, randomised, parallel assignment	Dexamethasone	Standard of care	October 2020
NCT04347980 ¹⁸ EudraCT 2020-001333-13 ¹⁹ (DHYSO)	MC [†] , SB, pIII, randomised, parallel assignment	Dexamethasone plus hydroxychloroquine	Hydroxychloroquine	June 2020
NCT04395105 ²⁰	MC [†] , OL, pIII, randomised, parallel assignment	Dexamethasone	Standard of care	December 2020
NCT04344730 ²¹ EudraCT 2020-001457-43 ²² (COVIDICUS)	MC [†] , QB, randomised, factorial assignment	Dexamethasone	Placebo	December 2020
NCT04360876 ²³	SC [#] , DB, pIIa, randomised, parallel assignment	Dexamethasone	Placebo	September 2020
NCT04327401 ²⁴ (CoDEX)	MC [^] , OL, pIII, randomised, parallel assignment	Dexamethasone	Standard of care	August 2020
IRCT20151227025726N17 ^{25**}	SC, OL, pII/III, randomised, parallel assignment	Dexamethasone plus standard of care ^Δ	Standard of care ^Δ	NA
IRCT20120215009014N354 ²⁶	SC, QB, pII, randomised, parallel assignment	3 intervention groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dexamethasone • Methylprednisolone • Hydrocortisone 	Standard of care	NA

Abbreviations: DB, double blind; MC, multicenter; NA, not available; OL, open label, pII, phase II; pIII, phase III; pIV: phase IV; QB, quadruple blind; SB, single blind; SC, single center.

*UK; [^]Spain; [†]France; [‡]Argentina; [#]USA; [°]Brazil; ^{**}Iran; ^Δincludes lopinavir/ritonavir

Recommendations from professional bodies

Guidelines issued by the WHO, National Institutes of Health (NIH, USA), European Society of Intensive Care Medicine and the Society of Critical Care Medicine (ESICM/SCCM) and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID, Singapore) do not recommend the routine use of systemic corticosteroids for COVID-19 unless patients are in refractory shock or were previously on chronic corticosteroid therapy prior to COVID-19 diagnosis⁸⁻¹¹.

For mechanically ventilated patients with COVID-19 and ARDS, NIH guidelines remain neutral while ESICM/SCCM guidelines suggest that corticosteroids may be used^{9,11}.

The WHO is currently coordinating a meta-analysis on the evidence for dexamethasone and will be updating their clinical guidance on the appropriate use of dexamethasone for treating COVID-19 once outcomes are available.

Conclusion

Current evidence on the efficacy and safety of dexamethasone for treating COVID-19 infection is limited. No firm scientific conclusion can be made, although the drug appears to be effective in severely ill patients with COVID-19 based on preliminary data. Several ongoing studies of dexamethasone for COVID-19 are likely to report results in the months ahead, and their findings will determine whether dexamethasone should be used more widely in this setting.

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