

Information resources for families

# Dealing with increased appetite when taking steroids

**Steroids are commonly used in the treatment of cancer in children. A common side effect of steroid treatment is an increase in appetite resulting in rapid weight gain. This can be distressing for both children and their parents. In addition, children often crave high fat, salty foods while on steroid treatment which can further increase their calorie intake and weight gain.**

Some weight gain while on steroids is difficult to avoid. In some cases, some weight gain may be of benefit especially if your child has lost weight during chemotherapy or is likely to do so after future cycles of chemotherapy. If the period of steroid treatment is relatively brief, it is a good chance for your child to regain some body weight and improve their nutritional status.

It is important to remember that some of the weight gained while on steroids is due to the fluid retention that accompanies steroid treatment.

However, it is important to aim to maintain your child's weight within a healthy range, therefore if your child has not lost weight before starting steroids or is already overweight then weight gain is undesirable.

The following strategies may be useful in minimising your child's weight gain while on steroids:

## Do

- Make sure your child eats three moderate sized meals plus 2–3 snacks per day. Ensure your child eats regularly so they are less likely to get to the point where hunger is overwhelming making eating difficult to control.
- Remember, it is difficult for your child to make good food choices whilst taking steroids therefore it is important that healthy foods are the most accessible options. Try to have your kitchen wellstocked with healthy meal and snack options.
- Discourage your child from frequently eating small meals throughout the day as this is likely to lead to weight gain. Be firm about sticking to set meal and snack times.
- Grill, bake, BBQ, steam and roast rather than frying and avoid adding fats and oil to cooking.

- Pack healthy snacks when going out.
- Try to distract your child from food with other activities such as playing games, reading and outdoor activities if they are well enough.
- Encourage your child to wait for 20 minutes after a meal or snack before eating more.
- Have a designated eating area in your home such as the dining room or kitchen table and encourage your child to eat all meals and snacks in this area.
- Ensure your child drinks plenty of fluids, preferably water or low fat milk.

## Don't

- Have high fat, high sugar 'junk' foods in your home as these are likely to be very tempting to a child on steroids and will contribute to weight gain, especially when eaten in excess.
- Allow juice, soft drink and cordial as these contain large amounts of sugar which will contribute to weight gain.
- Allow your child to eat in front of the TV.
- Buy take away food which is often high in calories.

## Try these low fat snack options

- Air popped popcorn with salt/spices (no butter)
- Low fat, low sugar yoghurt
- Carrot/celery/cucumber/capsicum sticks or snow peas
- Fruit kebabs
- Rice crackers/cakes with low fat dip/vegemite/jam

- Smoothie/milkshake made with fruit, low fat milk and yoghurt
- Baked beans or spaghetti
- Vegetable soup
- Fresh fruit or a small handful of dried fruit
- Sweetcorn cob
- Multigrain or fruit toasted muffin
- Low fat high fibre breakfast cereal with reduced fat milk
- Reduced fat instant noodles
- Pita bread or crumpet with cheese or vegemite
- Raisin toast with light cream cheese spread

Fortunately, an increase in appetite generally only lasts while your child is on steroid treatment and their appetite should return to normal when steroids are stopped. As a result, your child is likely to gradually return to their usual weight as their food intake decreases.

When your child is being weaned off steroids, their appetite may decrease to the point where they are eating very little. This is the body's way of returning to its usual weight and is generally not a cause for concern. However, multivitamins may be required during this time to make sure your child gets an adequate amount of vitamins and minerals. Once a more natural weight is reached their appetite will stabilise and your child should return to their usual eating habits.