Corticosteroids help to resolve sore throats quickly

Megan Arroll PhD, FHEA, CPsychol, CSci, AFBPsS; Visiting Research Fellow, Chronic Illness Research Team, University of East London, Stratford Campus, Water Lane, London, E15 4LZ, United Kingdom; Email: m.a.arroll@sa.uel.ac.uk

THE PROBLEM: Sore throats are a frequent reason for visits to primary care doctors; around a third of those with respiratory symptoms, such as sore throats, seek medical advice.1 Respiratory symptoms are more common than gastrointestinal or dermal symptoms, with 91% of people reporting at least one episode over a year compared to 54% and 27%, respectively.2 Sore throats are often caused by viral infections, such as rhinovirus, coronavirus and adenovirus; less so by bacterial infection. However, antibiotics are often prescribed for sore throats, perhaps in attempts to reduce the pain and/or known complications (e.g. peritonsillar abscess, rheumatic fever, and glomerulonephritis, though these are rare). With few other therapeutic options, the Cochrane review aimed to evaluate whether corticosteroids are effective in reducing the symptoms of a sore throat.

CLINICAL BOTTOM LINE: Corticosteroids are effective in the treatment of sore throats. Those taking corticosteroids were three times as likely to demonstrate a complete resolution of symptoms in 24 hours compared to those taking placebo. However, as both groups were given antibiotics, it is still unclear whether corticosteroids alone are effective.

Corticosteroids for the treatment of sore throats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Harms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corticosteroids vs placebo, both in addition to antibiotic treatment</td>
<td>Complete resolution of pain at 24 hours</td>
<td>No major harms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NNT for corticosteroids vs placebo = 5 (range 2 to 10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NNT = numbers needed to treat. An NNT of 5 means that for every 5 people given the treatment, 1 person will find the treatment effective.

References

All people residing in New Zealand have access to the Cochrane Library via the Ministry website www.health.govt.nz/cochrane-library

String of PEARLS

Mental health

PEARLS are succinct summaries of Cochrane Systematic Reviews for primary care practitioners—developed by Prof. Brian McAvoy for the Cochrane Primary Care Field (www.cochraneprimarycare.org), New Zealand Branch of the Australasian Cochrane Centre at the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Auckland (www.auckland.ac.nz/uoa), funded by the Ministry of Health (www.health.govt.nz), and published in NZ Doctor (www.nzdoctor.co.nz.).

- Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors are effective for obsessive compulsive disorder
- Evidence lacking on effectiveness of life skills programmes for chronic mental illness
- Pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy useful for body dysmorphic disorder
- Psychological treatments may be effective for managing irritable bowel syndrome
- Citalopram effective for major depression
- Psychological interventions may have adverse effects in post-traumatic stress disorder
- Psychological and educational interventions may prevent depression in children and adolescents

DISCLAIMER: PEARLS are for educational use only and are not meant to guide clinical activity, nor are they a clinical guideline.