Do corticosteroids reduce bronchiolitis hospitalizations?

EVIDENCE-BASED ANSWER

A No. Corticosteroids alone don’t decrease hospital admissions or length of stay among children with bronchiolitis (strength of recommendation [SOR]: A, meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials [RCTs]).

Combining oral dexamethasone and inhaled epinephrine appears to prevent one hospital admission for every 11 patients treated (SOR: B, single large RCT).

Evidence summary

A 2013 Cochrane review of 17 RCTs with 2596 patients compared corticosteroids with placebo for treating bronchiolitis in children younger than 2 years.1 The studies used dexamethasone, prednisolone, prednisone, and budesonide delivered by oral, inhaled, intravenous (IV), or intramuscular (IM) routes, ranging between a one-day dose to a 5-day taper. Doses ranged from 0.5 to 2 mg/kg/d for oral and parenteral routes and 0.2 to 1 mg for inhalation. Outcomes were rate of admissions at Days 1 and 7 from outpatient trials and length of stay among inpatients.

Investigators found no significant difference in admission rates at Day 1 and Day 7 between children treated with corticosteroids compared with placebo (Day 1: 8 trials, 1762 patients; relative risk [RR]=0.92; 95% confidence interval [CI], 0.78-1.1; Day 7: 5 trials, 1530 patients; RR=0.86; 95% CI, 0.70-1.1). Length of hospital stay didn’t differ between children treated with corticosteroids and children who received placebo (8 trials, 633 patients; mean difference= −0.18 days; 95% CI, −0.39 to 0.04).

Corticosteroid + epinephrine can lower hospital admissions

A 2009 multicenter, double-blind RCT with 800 patients (infants 6 weeks to 12 months of age with a first episode of bronchiolitis) that was included in the 2013 Cochrane review also compared the combination of epinephrine and corticosteroid with placebo and either agent alone.2

Infants were assigned to 4 groups: oral dexamethasone alone (1 mg/kg in the emergency room [ER] on Day 1, followed by 0.6 mg/kg daily for 5 days); nebulized epinephrine alone (2 treatments of 3 mL epinephrine 1:1000 solution); combined dexamethasone and epinephrine; and placebo. The primary outcome was hospital admission as long as 7 days after being seen in the ER.

Rates of admission were similar for the dexamethasone and placebo groups (25.6% vs 26.4%, respectively; RR=0.96; 95% CI, 0.69-1.3). The epinephrine group’s rate of admission was 23.7% (RR=0.88; CI, 0.63–1.23). Only the dexamethasone-epinephrine group had a lower rate of admission compared with placebo (17% vs 26%; RR=0.65; 95% CI, 0.45-0.95). The number needed to treat with dexamethasone-epinephrine to prevent one hospital admission was 11.

Review prompts revised recommendations

Based on the Cochrane review, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) revised its evidence-based clinical practice guideline in 2014 to recommend that clinicians not administer systemic corticosteroids to infants with a diagnosis of bronchiolitis in any set-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 357
ting (evidence quality B, strong recommendation, based on results of multiple RCTs). The AAP advocates additional large trials to clarify whether combination therapy (corticosteroids plus agents with α or β agonist activity) is effective.

References