

Are Steroid Therapies Safe for Your Pet?

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Karen Becker: Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and today I want to talk about the dangers of overusing steroids in veterinary medicine. When I talk about steroid therapy, I'm not talking about anabolic steroids like testosterone that you sometimes hear about professional athletes using to make themselves big and strong. I'm talking about catabolic steroids that are in my opinion, wildly overprescribed by conventional veterinarians. Steroids are incredibly powerful drugs that can have very serious side effects most pet parents aren't aware of. There are two primary types of steroids that are naturally secreted by your pet's adrenal glands. The first are called mineralocorticoids, which are produced in the outside layer of the adrenal glands and secrete the hormone called aldosterone, and aldosterone is used by the body to regulate electrolytes. This second type of naturally occurring steroid produced by the adrenal glands are called glucocorticoids or cortisol. These are very important hormones that influence your dog or cat's metabolism and their immune system function.

Karen Becker: Synthetic versions of these glucocorticoids are the drugs that are most overprescribed by veterinarians, either for oral use in pill or tablet form or by injection. There are a number of these drugs available and they usually end in one, so prednisone, prednisolone, dexamethasone, betamethasone, all the ones mean steroids. Pets prescribed steroids usually have one of three health-related problems going on, the most common of which is inflammation of any kind, and I'll talk more about this in a minute. The least common reason your pet might end up on glucocorticoids is to treat an emergency. If your dog is hit by a car and suffers acute brain swelling as a result, the emergency clinic will use steroids to very quickly remove the inflammation that's causing the traumatic brain injury. That's a good thing. In these situations, we're very thankful of the existence of steroids because they literally can save lives.

Karen Becker: Another very common reason steroids are used in veterinary medicine is to intentionally suppress an animal's immune system when they're dealing with autoimmune disease. Autoimmune disease is also called immune-mediated disease, and this is when a pet's body, their immune system is so confused that they actually attack themselves. And in these situations, steroids are used to actually turn the immune system off and intentionally do so to not only provide relief but to save the patient's life. The hope is that when we wean these patients off of steroids, that their immune system is reset at the balanced state. But hands down, the most common reason for putting a pet on steroids are neither one of these life-threatening situations.

Karen Becker: In fact, the most common reason veterinarians prescribed steroids, usually prednisone, which vets just called pred, is to manage inflammation responses that are usually not life-threatening. Inflammation is an incredibly common

reason that pets visit veterinarians, and we diagnose all types of inflammation with the ending word itis. So any type of word that ends in it is, means inflammation. So dermatitis means inflammation of the skin. Colitis means inflammation of the colon. Otitis is inflammation of the ear canals. We aren't really taught in veterinary school how to diagnose the root causes of inflammation, which is extra unfortunate because we never really get to the root cause of disease. So most conventional veterinarians prescribe a course of steroids for symptomatic treatment, which means when we see anything red, swollen, or irritated, we were taught to think, prescribed steroids.

Karen Becker: Chronic inflammation or chronic inflammatory conditions are also routinely treated with steroids. And these conditions include IBD or inflammatory bowel disease, allergies and other skin conditions, as well as asthma, and even things like inflamed gums or eyes. Even some types of cancers are actually managed with steroids.

Karen Becker: Now, on the positive side, steroids are some of the most potent drugs we have to manage inflammation. So they're extremely effective at treating a wide range of symptoms. In fact, I was told in veterinary school 25 plus years ago that nothing should die without the benefits of trying steroids first. And a lot of veterinarians kind of live by this mantra. In fact, the very first veterinarian I ever worked for in Chicago, he kept a little packets of steroids and antibiotics, amoxicillin and prednisone, on the counter in little manila packets of 20 pills each because he prescribed them so routinely that the techs couldn't keep up with just counting pills, so he just had pre-packaged steroid prescriptions ready to go.

Karen Becker: The downside of using steroids, of handing steroids out like Tic Tacs and candy in veterinary practice, which is incredibly common, the downside is that they have a very long list of side effects, some of which can, over time, create a whole lot of health problems that actually clients are not informed about and that they didn't know could even happen when their pets were on steroids.

Karen Becker: One of the biggest drawbacks to steroids use is that actually over time, even maintenance doses of steroids can turn the immune system off or it can cause what we say immunosuppression. And when animals have immunosuppression, that means their immune systems because of steroids are not functioning 100% and the consequences of your pet being immunosuppressed are vast. When the immune system isn't 100% a lot of negative health consequences can occur. Your dog or cat can have a very hard time fighting secondary infections, including being able to manage naturally occurring yeast and bacteria on the body. Other side effects of steroid therapy can be, increased thirst and hunger, increased urination, peeing around the house, lethargy, GI problems, including GI ulcers, hair loss. A potbelly can be noticed with chronic long-term steroid use, which oftentimes signals the presence of Cushing's disease brought on by steroid use. Blood clots are common. Steroid-induced diabetes and pancreatitis, as well as a lot of other secondary infections depending on what bug or virus your pet's immune system could have been exposed to.

Karen Becker: For me, the most significant issue with the overprescribing of steroids is that the underlying condition that the original steroid was prescribed for oftentimes never is identified. We need to remember that inflammation is just a symptom that the body produces when there's a deeper issue that needs to be addressed. When doctors use steroids to only treat the symptom of inflammation without pursuing why the body created the symptom in the first place, we aren't addressing or diagnosing the root cause, which if left undiagnosed or untreated, usually gets worse over time. Because the root cause of disease oftentimes goes unaddressed, steroid therapy can become ineffective at masking the symptoms over time, and clients oftentimes end up saying, "You know what, the prednisone doesn't work anymore." When in all actuality, it's not that the drug doesn't work anymore, it's that the animal has adapted to the drug and that the underlying condition has been allowed to progress and get worse to the point that the steroids are no longer effective.

Karen Becker: Now, before you attack your veterinarian for prescribing steroids, please recognize that our educational system and our training teaches us that this is what we're supposed to do when a patient comes in with inflammation, that conventional medical approach for both people and animals is to focus on treating symptoms rather than the underlying cause of the symptoms. So for instance, I was taught in veterinary school that the definition of an allergy is an immune system overreaction to environmental or dietary allergens. Got it. And we were also taught in veterinary school a variety of ways to manage allergies, including steroids. But a bigger question is why is the immune system overreacting? Do we have a leaky gut situation or dysbiosis that is creating a hypersensitive patient? We aren't really taught in veterinary school how to tease out the answers, which are actually super important of determining why the patient has the symptoms.

Karen Becker: And believe it or not, it's not uncommon for owners to be totally unaware that their pets are even receiving steroids. Vets will oftentimes refer to these medications as anti-inflammatory shots or an allergy shot, and not even say that word prednisone or steroid. If you don't realize that your pet is taking steroids or if you're not knowledgeable about what they can do to the body, then you can end up being really surprised and actually heartbroken to learn that steroids have side effects that could be irreversible for your pet. So actually the ball is in your court as your pet's advocate to always ask your veterinarian, what exactly is the name of the drug that you're prescribing and what are the side effects?

Karen Becker: Steroids are really cheap compared to digging for root causes, so sometimes pet parents end up having to use steroids because this is the cheapest, easiest way to manage symptoms and provide some relief. And in these situations, it's super important that owners are aware of the long list of side effects that come with using these drugs so that if the side effects begin showing themselves, they're able to taper their pets off. However, if you're a pet parent that has unknowingly been giving your pet steroids to cover up an underlying disease process and this isn't what you intended to do, I do recommend that you talked to your veterinarian about creating an exit plan for these drugs, which requires

a slow weaning process to avoid an adrenal crisis, especially if the animal's been on steroids for quite some time. You can't just stop cold turkey.

Karen Becker: Of course, my functional medicine approach is to identify root causes of disease and that's quite different than what my conventional medicine training provided when it comes to what and why I would ever prescribe steroids to a patient. I absolutely have used steroids for stabilizing medical emergencies and to stabilize animals with acute disease. The difference is, I don't stop there and I would encourage you to do the same. When your dog or cat has a health problem, the goal should be to identify and treat the root cause while relieving symptoms, preferably with nontoxic therapies. This is when finding an integrative veterinarian becomes a necessity, either in person or via a phone consult.

Karen Becker: Natural alternatives to glucocorticoids do exist, but unfortunately, only certain integrative and functional medicine veterinarians who have continued their education past the four years of vet school are familiar with them. You see, most veterinary schools don't offer integrative medicine courses. We only are taught conventional pharmacological drugs in pharmacology. So until veterinary schools offer integrative courses, vets graduate not having a full toolbox of nontoxic therapies to offer you. So for example, when I graduated from vet school, I learned afterwards that plants also produce their own natural cortisol and that you can extract plant cortisol and then give plant cortisol to mammals with incredibly great benefits and no side effects. So my thought was, why don't all that to have access to this, plant-based steroids? I mean, why didn't we learn about this in vet school? But we didn't.

Karen Becker: So when I'm dealing with inflammatory conditions, in addition to diving into diagnostics to determine why the animal has a massive inflammatory response, I also want to make my patients feel better, so I will use plant sterols. I also will use proteolytic enzyme therapy. I use a lot of homeopathics or Chinese herbs to help mitigate the symptoms as well as acupuncture. All of these are drug-free and very effective alternatives.

Karen Becker: So in closing, it's important to ensure that your dog or cat isn't receiving steroid treatment for an extended period of time, or just because your vet doesn't really know what's going on. That, in my opinion, isn't an acceptable reason to have animals on steroids for a long period of time. If you find yourself frustrated with your pet's symptoms and your pet's on steroids, but not getting better, I strongly recommend that you add in a second or third opinion via a well-trained, integrative or functional medicine practitioner who can provide nontoxic alternatives that can help relieve your pet's symptoms without using steroids, while you begin the process of uncovering why your pet has those symptoms in the first place.