

WHO welcomes preliminary results about dexamethasone use in treating critically ill COVID-19 patients

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News release

The World Health Organization (WHO) welcomes the initial clinical trial results from the United Kingdom (UK) that show dexamethasone, a corticosteroid, can be lifesaving for patients who are critically ill with COVID-19. For patients on ventilators, the treatment was shown to reduce mortality by about one third, and for patients requiring only oxygen, mortality was cut by about one fifth, according to preliminary findings shared with WHO.

The benefit was only seen in patients seriously ill with COVID-19, and was not observed in patients with milder disease.

“This is the first treatment to be shown to reduce mortality in patients with COVID-19 requiring oxygen or ventilator support,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “This is great news and I congratulate the Government of the UK, the University of Oxford, and the many hospitals and patients in the UK who have contributed to this lifesaving scientific breakthrough.”

Dexamethasone is a steroid that has been used since the 1960s to reduce inflammation in a range of conditions, including inflammatory disorders and certain cancers. It has been listed on the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines since 1977 in multiple formulations, and is currently off-patent and affordably available in most countries.

The researchers shared initial insights about the results of the trial with WHO, and we are looking forward to the full data analysis in the coming days. WHO will coordinate a meta-analysis to increase our overall understanding of this intervention. WHO clinical guidance will be updated to reflect how and when the drug should be used in COVID-19.

Today's news builds off the WHO Research & Development Blueprint meeting, which took place in Geneva in mid-February to accelerate health technologies for COVID-19, where further research into the use of steroids was highlighted as a priority. The findings reinforce the importance of large randomized control trials that produce actionable evidence. WHO will continue to work together with all partners to further develop lifesaving therapeutics and vaccines to tackle COVID-19 including under the umbrella of the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator.