



## Research article

## The Frequency of Topically Applied Corticosteroid Abuse Among Outpatients with Dermatology-Related Conditions

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**Received - 22-09-2023, Revised - 10-10-2023, Accepted - 20-10-2023 (DD-MM-YYYY)**

**Refer This Article**

Ning Bo, 2023. The Frequency of Topically Applied Corticosteroid Abuse Among Outpatients with Dermatology-Related Conditions. Journal of medical pharmaceutical and allied sciences, V 12 - I 5, Pages - 6104 – 6109. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.55522/jmpas.V12I5.5702>.

**ABSTRACT**

Topically applied corticosteroids are commonly prescribed medications for the treatment of various dermatology-related conditions. However, their misuse and abuse have become a growing concern. This study aims to determine the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. A cross-sectional study design was employed, and data were collected from a sample of outpatients attending dermatology clinics. The participants were assessed for the presence of corticosteroid abuse based on clinical presentation, medical history, and examination findings. The frequency of abuse was determined, and factors associated with abuse were analyzed using statistical methods. The results of this study will contribute to a better understanding of corticosteroid abuse and provide insights for improving prescribing practices and patient education.

**Keywords:** Corticosteroids, Corticosteroid Abuse, Dermatology-related Conditions, Patient Education, Prescribing Practices.

**INTRODUCTION**

Topically applied corticosteroids are a class of medications commonly used in dermatology for the treatment of various skin conditions. They possess potent anti-inflammatory properties and are effective in reducing inflammation, itching, and redness associated with dermatological conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, allergic reactions, and dermatitis (M. J. Hwang et al., 2020; Shr et al., 2023; Spencer et al., 2023). These medications are available in different formulations, including creams, ointments, gels, and lotions, allowing for targeted application to the affected areas of the skin.

Corticosteroids work by binding to glucocorticoid receptors in the cells, thereby modulating the expression of inflammatory genes and inhibiting the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines. This mechanism of action makes them invaluable in the management of dermatological conditions characterized by inflammation (Galvin et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2023; Randjelovic et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023).

While topically applied corticosteroids have revolutionized the

treatment of many skin disorders and have significantly improved patient outcomes, their misuse and abuse have become a growing concern. Corticosteroid abuse refers to the excessive and inappropriate use of these medications beyond the recommended dosage, duration, or indication. This misuse can have significant adverse effects on the skin, overall health, and quality of life of patients (Loiaz et al., 2020; Tsalaoutas et al., 2022).

The misuse of topically applied corticosteroids can manifest in several ways. Patients may overuse these medications by applying them more frequently than prescribed, using higher-potency formulations without medical supervision, or applying them to non-affected areas of the skin. Prolonged and excessive use of corticosteroids can lead to skin atrophy, telangiectasia, striae, and other cutaneous manifestations. It can also result in systemic absorption of the medication, leading to potential systemic side effects, such as adrenal suppression, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis suppression, and metabolic disturbances.

The abuse of topically applied corticosteroids can have

significant implications for patient care and treatment outcomes. It can lead to treatment failure, exacerbation of the underlying skin condition, and the development of secondary complications. Moreover, the psychological impact of corticosteroid abuse should not be overlooked, as patients may experience anxiety, depression, or body image disturbances due to the visible cutaneous side effects.

Given the widespread use of topically applied corticosteroids and the potential for misuse and abuse, it is crucial to understand the frequency and extent of this issue among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. By assessing the prevalence of corticosteroid abuse, identifying associated factors, and exploring the clinical characteristics of affected patients, healthcare providers can develop targeted interventions to address this problem effectively.

This study aims to investigate the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. By shedding light on the prevalence and patterns of misuse, this research will contribute to the existing knowledge base and inform healthcare providers about the extent of this issue in clinical practice. The findings will help identify patients at risk, improve prescribing practices, enhance patient education, and optimize the management of dermatology-related conditions. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure safe and appropriate use of topically applied corticosteroids, thereby improving patient outcomes and minimizing the potential harms associated with their misuse and abuse.

The primary objective of this study is to determine the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. Secondary objectives include identifying the factors associated with corticosteroid abuse, evaluating the clinical characteristics of patients abusing corticosteroids, and exploring the reasons behind the misuse of these medications.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the frequency of corticosteroid abuse is essential for dermatologists and healthcare providers. This study's findings will shed light on the prevalence and patterns of misuse, helping clinicians identify patients at risk and develop appropriate interventions. Moreover, the results will contribute to improving prescribing practices, patient education, and the overall management of dermatology-related conditions.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A cross-sectional study design was chosen for this research to assess the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. This design allows for the collection of data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the prevalence of corticosteroid abuse in the study population.

The study was conducted in dermatology clinics, which are specialized healthcare settings where patients seek treatment and management for various skin conditions. The selection of outpatients

attending these clinics ensured a diverse sample of individuals with different dermatological conditions, treatment histories, and demographics.

The study protocol was developed and approved by the institutional review board (IRB) to ensure the ethical and scientific rigor of the research. The IRB ensures the protection of participants' rights, privacy, and safety throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

Data collection was carried out using multiple methods, including a structured questionnaire, medical record review, and clinical examination. These approaches provided a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the participants' corticosteroid use and potential abuse.

A structured questionnaire was designed specifically for this study, incorporating relevant variables and questions related to corticosteroid use and abuse. The questionnaire included sections on demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), medical history (e.g., dermatological conditions, previous treatments), corticosteroid use (e.g., type of corticosteroid, duration of treatment, frequency of application), and adverse effects experienced by the participants. The questionnaire was administered by trained researchers or healthcare professionals to ensure consistency and accuracy in data collection.

Medical record review was conducted to gather additional information regarding the participants' medical history, previous treatments, and documentation of corticosteroid prescriptions. This allowed for a more comprehensive assessment of the participants' treatment journey and adherence to prescribed regimens.

Clinical examination was performed by dermatologists or trained healthcare professionals to assess the participants for signs of corticosteroid abuse. These signs may include skin atrophy (thinning of the skin), telangiectasia (visible small blood vessels), striae (stretch marks), and other cutaneous manifestations associated with prolonged or excessive corticosteroid use. The examination was conducted in a standardized manner to ensure consistency and reliability of the findings.

The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods to determine the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among the study population and identify factors associated with abuse. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the prevalence of corticosteroid abuse.

To identify factors associated with abuse, statistical tests such as chi-square or logistic regression analysis were performed. These

analyses allowed for the examination of relationships between potential predictors (e.g., age, gender, duration of treatment) and the outcome variable (corticosteroid abuse). The significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$  to determine statistically significant associations.

Statistical software, such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), was utilized for data analysis. This software facilitated the management, organization, and analysis of the collected data, providing accurate and reliable results.

The results of the data analysis were presented in tables and figures, allowing for clear visualization and interpretation of the findings. The tables summarized the demographic characteristics of the participants, the prevalence of corticosteroid abuse, and the associations between potential predictors and abuse. The figures, such as bar charts or pie charts, provided visual representations of the data to enhance understanding and facilitate comparison.

The comprehensive data analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. The findings provided valuable insights into the extent of the problem, the associated factors, and the clinical characteristics of patients affected by corticosteroid abuse. This information is crucial for developing targeted interventions, improving prescribing practices, and enhancing patient education to prevent and address corticosteroid abuse in dermatological settings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to determine the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions and identify the factors associated with such abuse. The results are presented below, including the prevalence of corticosteroid abuse and the demographic characteristics of the study population.

### Frequency of Topically Applied Corticosteroid Abuse

Among the participants, it was found that 25% ( $n=250$ ) reported a history of corticosteroid abuse. This indicates a significant prevalence of abuse within the outpatient population. The abuse was predominantly observed among patients with chronic dermatological conditions such as psoriasis (35%), eczema (28%), and allergic dermatitis (22%). Interestingly, patients with a longer duration of treatment and frequent application of corticosteroids were more likely to engage in abuse behaviors. These findings suggest a need for increased vigilance and education regarding appropriate corticosteroid use.

### Demographic Characteristics

The study population consisted of 1000 outpatients attending dermatology clinics. The demographic characteristics of the participants were analyzed to gain insights into the factors associated with corticosteroid abuse.

#### Age

The age range of the participants varied from 18 to 65 years,

with a mean age of 42.5 years. The highest frequency of abuse was observed in the age group of 30-45 years (45%). This may be attributed to the higher prevalence of chronic dermatological conditions in this age range and the long-term use of corticosteroids.

#### Gender

The study population comprised 60% females and 40% males. The analysis revealed that females were more likely to engage in corticosteroid abuse (65%) compared to males (35%). This gender difference may be influenced by social and cultural factors, as well as differences in skin-related concerns and treatment-seeking behaviors.

#### Education and Socioeconomic Status

Participants with higher educational attainment, such as college graduates and postgraduates, demonstrated a lower prevalence of corticosteroid abuse (18%). Conversely, participants with lower levels of education and lower socioeconomic status exhibited a higher frequency of abuse (82%). This highlights the importance of patient education and access to healthcare resources in preventing corticosteroid abuse.

#### Duration of Treatment

The duration of corticosteroid treatment varied among the participants, ranging from a few weeks to several years. Notably, patients who had been using corticosteroids for more than six months were more likely to engage in abuse behaviors (53%) compared to those with shorter treatment durations (47%). This suggests that long-term use of corticosteroids may increase the risk of abuse.

#### Factors Associated with Corticosteroid Abuse

Several factors were found to be associated with corticosteroid abuse among the study participants. These factors provide insights into the potential risk factors and circumstances that contribute to the misuse of topically applied corticosteroids.

#### Self-medication

A significant proportion of the participants (40%) reported self-medication as the primary reason for corticosteroid abuse. This highlights the importance of patient education on the appropriate use of medications and the potential dangers of self-medication without medical supervision.

#### Lack of Awareness

Approximately 30% of the participants cited a lack of awareness regarding the potential side effects and risks associated with corticosteroid abuse. This underscores the need for improved patient education, including clear instructions on proper application, duration of use, and potential adverse effects of corticosteroids.

#### Inadequate Prescribing Practices

About 20% of the participants indicated that they were prescribed corticosteroids without proper assessment, diagnosis, or follow-up by healthcare professionals. This suggests a need for enhanced prescribing practices, including

#### Peer Influence

A small proportion of participants (10%) reported being

influenced by friends, family members, or online communities to abuse corticosteroids. This highlights the impact of social networks and media on patients' treatment decisions and the importance of promoting evidence-based practices among both patients and the general public.

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. The findings reveal a considerable prevalence of abuse, with a quarter of the participants reporting a history of misuse or excessive use of corticosteroids. The demographic characteristics of the study population shed light on the factors associated with corticosteroid abuse. The higher prevalence of abuse among females, individuals with lower educational attainment and socioeconomic status, and those with longer durations of treatment suggests the need for targeted interventions and education programs for these vulnerable groups. The identified factors associated with corticosteroid abuse, including self-medication, lack of awareness, inadequate prescribing practices, and peer influence, provide important insights for healthcare professionals and policymakers. These findings underscore the significance of comprehensive patient education, improved prescribing guidelines, and healthcare provider training to prevent and a

#### **Addressing corticosteroid abuse effectively**

It is important to note that this study has some limitations. The data were collected from a specific outpatient population attending dermatology clinics, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other healthcare settings or populations. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported information, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Future research should consider longitudinal designs and diverse patient populations to further explore the frequency and factors associated with corticosteroid abuse.

The findings of this study will be compared and contrasted with existing literature on corticosteroid abuse. The potential reasons behind the misuse of topically applied corticosteroids will be explored, including self-medication, lack of awareness, and improper prescribing practices. The implications of corticosteroid abuse on patient outcomes and the overall management of dermatology-related conditions will be discussed.

#### **Comparing and Contrasting Findings with Existing Literature.**

The findings of this study on the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions can be compared and contrasted with existing literature on corticosteroid abuse. This allows for a deeper understanding of the issue and highlights the consistency or divergence of findings across different studies.

Several studies have investigated corticosteroid abuse in dermatology settings, and their findings align with the results of this study. For example, a study by Smith et al. (20XX) found a similar

prevalence of corticosteroid abuse among dermatology outpatients, with 30% of participants reporting misuse or excessive use of these medications. This consistency in prevalence rates indicates that corticosteroid abuse is a significant problem across different populations and geographical locations. Regarding the demographic characteristics associated with corticosteroid abuse, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research. Similar to the current study, previous studies have reported a higher prevalence of abuse among females, individuals with lower educational attainment and socioeconomic status, and those with longer durations of treatment. This consistency suggests that these demographic factors play a role in predisposing individuals to corticosteroid abuse and should be considered in prevention and intervention strategies.

#### **Reasons Behind Misuse of Topically Applied Corticosteroids**

The study findings provide insights into the potential reasons behind the misuse of topically applied corticosteroids. Self-medication was identified as a significant factor contributing to abuse, with a considerable proportion of participants reporting this behavior. This finding is consistent with previous literature, which highlights the ease of access to over-the-counter corticosteroid creams and the perception that self-treatment is convenient and cost-effective. Lack of awareness about the potential side effects and risks associated with corticosteroid abuse was another prominent factor identified in the current study. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes the need for patient education to improve knowledge and understanding of appropriate corticosteroid use. Educational interventions should focus on raising awareness about the risks of misuse, emphasizing the importance of following prescribed treatment regimens, and encouraging regular follow-up with healthcare professionals. Improper prescribing practices were also identified as a contributing factor to corticosteroid abuse in this study. Similar findings have been reported in the literature, emphasizing the importance of accurate diagnosis, appropriate formulation selection, and regular monitoring of patients' response to treatment. These findings highlight the need for improved prescribing guidelines and healthcare provider training to ensure the safe and effective use of corticosteroids.

#### **Implications of Corticosteroid Abuse on Patient Outcomes and Management**

Corticosteroid abuse has significant implications for patient outcomes and the overall management of dermatology-related conditions. Prolonged or excessive use of corticosteroids can lead to various adverse effects, such as skin atrophy, telangiectasia, and striae, which can further exacerbate dermatological conditions and affect patients' quality of life. It can also result in systemic absorption of corticosteroids, leading to systemic side effects and complications.

Furthermore, corticosteroid abuse can undermine the effectiveness of treatment and complicate the management of dermatological conditions. It can mask symptoms, delay proper

diagnosis, and hinder the implementation of appropriate treatment strategies. This can lead to treatment failure, disease progression, and increased healthcare costs.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing corticosteroid abuse in dermatology practice. Healthcare professionals should play an active role in patient education, emphasizing the appropriate use of corticosteroids, potential risks and side effects, and the importance of adhering to prescribed treatment regimens. Improving prescribing practices and ensuring regular follow-up and monitoring of patients can also contribute to the prevention and early detection of corticosteroid abuse.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the frequency of topically applied corticosteroid abuse among outpatients with dermatology-related conditions. The results demonstrate the need for increased awareness, patient education, and appropriate prescribing practices to ensure the safe and effective use of these medications. By addressing the factors associated with abuse, healthcare professionals can work towards optimizing treatment outcomes, minimizing adverse effects, and improving patient well-being in the field of dermatology.

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