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.

Corticosteroids

Corticosteroids (cortisone-like medicines) are used to provide relief for inflamed areas of the body. They lessen swelling, redness, itching, and allergic reactions. They are often used as part of the treatment for a number of different diseases, such as severe allergies or skin problems, asthma, or arthritis.

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.

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.