

PROF. CLAUS BACHERT (Orcid ID : 0000-0003-4742-1665)
 PROF. IOANA AGACHE (Orcid ID : 0000-0001-7994-364X)
 PROF. ALVARO A CRUZ (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-7403-3871)
 DR. TARI HAAHTELA (Orcid ID : 0000-0003-4757-2156)
 DR. DÉsirÉE ERLINDA LARENAS-LINNEMANN (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-5713-5331)
 DR. KEN OHTA (Orcid ID : 0000-0001-9734-4579)
 PROF. LIAM O'MAHONY (Orcid ID : 0000-0003-4705-3583)
 DR. NIKOLAOS G PAPADOPOULOS (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-4448-3468)
 PROF. OLIVER PFAAR (Orcid ID : 0000-0003-4374-9639)
 PROF. TORSTEN ZUBERBIER (Orcid ID : 0000-0002-1466-8875)

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Intranasal corticosteroids in allergic rhinitis in COVID-19 infected patients: An ARIA-EAACI statement

Jean Bousquet^{*/**} (1-3), Cezmi Akdis^{*(4)}, Marek Jutel^{*, +} (5), Claus Bachert^{**} (6), Ludger Klimek (7) ⁺, Ioana Agache (8) ⁺, Ignacio J Ansotegui (9), Anna Bedbrook (3)^{**}, Sinthia Bosnic-Anticevich (10)^{**}, Giorgio W Canonica (11) ^{**}, Tomas Chivato (12), ⁺ Alvaro A Cruz (13) ^{**}, Wienia Czarlewski (14) ^{**}, Stefano Del Giacco (15), Hui Du (16), Joao A Fonseca (17) ^{**}, Yadong Gao (31), Tari Haahtela (18)^{**}, Karin Hoffmann-Sommergruber⁺ (19), Juan C Ivancevich (20)^{**}, Nikolai Khaltaev (21), Edward F Knol (22) ⁺, Piotr Kuna (23)^{**}, Desiree Larenas-Linnemann (24)^{**}, Joaquim Mullol (25) ^{**}, Robert Naclerio (26)^{**}, Ken Ohta (27)^{**}, Y Okamoto (28)^{**}, Liam O'Mahony⁺ (29), Gabrielle L Onorato (3), Nikos G Papadopoulos (30) ^{**}, Oliver Pfaar (32)^{**}, Boleslaw Samolinski (33) ^{**}, Jürgen Schwarze⁺ (34), Sanna Toppila-Salmi (18)^{**}, Maria Teresa Ventura (35), Arunas Valiulis (36) ^{**}, Arzu Yorgancioglu (37) ^{**}, Torsten Zuberbier (38) ^{**} and the ARIA-MASK study group

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*: the first 3 authors participated equally to the paper

** : Member of ARIA and MASK boards

+: Member of EAACI board of officers

1. Charité, Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Berlin Institute of Health, Comprehensive Allergy Center, Department of Dermatology and Allergy, Berlin, Germany.
2. University Hospital Montpellier, France.
3. MACVIA-France, Montpellier, France.
4. Swiss Institute of Allergy and Asthma Research (SIAR), University of Zurich, Davos, Switzerland.
5. Department of Clinical Immunology, Wrocław Medical University, and ALL-MED Medical Research Institute, Wrocław, Poland.
6. Upper Airways Research Laboratory, ENT Dept, Ghent University Hospital, Ghent, Belgium.
7. Center for Rhinology and Allergology, Wiesbaden, Germany.
8. Transylvania University Brasov, Brasov, Romania.
9. Department of Allergy and Immunology, Hospital Quirónsalud Bizkaia, Erandio, Spain.
10. Woolcock Institute of Medical Research, University of Sydney and Woolcock Emphysema Centre and Sydney Local Health District, Glebe, NSW, Australia.
11. Personalized Medicine Clinic Asthma & Allergy, Humanitas University, Humanitas Research Hospital, Rozzano, Milan, and Department of Biomedical Sciences, Humanitas University, Pieve Emanuele (MI), Italy.
12. School of Medicine, University CEU San Pablo, Madrid, Spain.
13. ProAR – Nucleo de Excelencia em Asma, Federal University of Bahia, Brazil and WHO GARD Planning Group, Brazil.
14. Medical Consulting Czarlewski, Levallois, and MASK-air, Montpellier France.

- Accepted Article
15. Department of Medical Sciences and Public Health and Unit of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, University Hospital "Duilio Casula", University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy.
 16. Department of Respiratory Medicine, Wuhan Children's Hospital, Tongji Medical College, Huazhong, University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China.
 17. Center for research in health technologies and information systems- CINTESIS, Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal ; Allergy Unit, Instituto CUF Porto e Hospital CUF Porto, Porto, Portugal ; Health Information and Decision Sciences Department - CIDES, Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal ; Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal.
 18. Skin and Allergy Hospital, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland.
 19. Department of Pathophysiology and Allergy Research, Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria.
 20. Servicio de Alergia e Immunologia, Clinica Santa Isabel, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
 21. GARD Chairman, Geneva, Switzerland.
 22. Departments of Immunology and Dermatology/Allergology, University Medical Center Utrecht, The Netherlands.
 23. Division of Internal Medicine, Asthma and Allergy, Barlicki University Hospital, Medical University of Lodz, Poland.
 24. Center of Excellence in Asthma and Allergy, Médica Sur Clinical Foundation and Hospital, México City, Mexico.
 25. Rhinology Unit & Smell Clinic, ENT Department, Hospital Clínic; Clinical & Experimental Respiratory Immunoallergy, IDIBAPS, CIBERES, University of Barcelona, Spain.
 26. Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.
 27. National Hospital Organization, Tokyo National Hospital, Tokyo, Japan.
 28. Dept of Otorhinolaryngology, Chiba University Hospital, Chiba, Japan.
 29. Departments of Medicine and Microbiology, APC Microbiome Ireland, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.
 30. Division of Infection, Immunity & Respiratory Medicine, Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK and Allergy Dpt, 2nd Pediatric Clinic, University of Athens, Athens, Greece.

31. Department of Allergology, Zhongnan Hospital of Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, China
32. Department of Otorhinolaryngology, Head and Neck Surgery, Section of Rhinology and Allergy, University Hospital Marburg, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany.
33. Department of Prevention of Environmental Hazards and Allergology, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland.
34. Centre for Inflammation Research, Child Life and Health, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.
35. University of Bari Medical School, Unit of Geriatric Immunoallergology, Bari, Italy.
36. Vilnius University Faculty of Medicine, Institute of Clinical Medicine & Institute of Health Sciences, Vilnius, Lithuania; European Academy of Paediatrics (EAP/UEMS-SP), Brussels, Belgium.
37. Celal Bayar University Department of Pulmonology, Manisa, Turkey.
38. Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin, corporate member of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Berlin Institute of Health, Comprehensive Allergy-Centre, Department of Dermatology and Allergy, member of GA²LEN, Berlin, Germany.

Author for correspondence

Professor Jean Bousquet

CHU Arnaud de Villeneuve, 371 Avenue du Doyen Gaston Giraud, 34295 Montpellier Cedex 5, France

Tel +33 611 42 88 47, Fax :+33 467 41 67 01 jean.bousquet@orange.fr

ARIA-MASK study group

Agache Ioana, Akdis Mubeccel, Al-Ahmad Mona, Alvarez Cuesta Emilio, Arshad Hasan, Artesani Maria Cristina, Awad Zeinab,

Bachert Claus, Badr Eldin Mostafa, Barba Sergio, Barbara Cristina, Bateman Eric, Beghe Bianca, Bergmann Larl-Christian, Bernstein

David, Bjermer Leif, Boner Attilio, Bonini Sergio, Bosnic-Anticevich Sinthia, Bosse isabelle, Bouchard Jacques, Boulet Louis-Philippe, Braidó Fulvio, Brightling Christopher, Buhl Roland, Bunu Carmen, Bush Andrew, Busse William, Caballero-Fonseca Fernan, Caimmi Davide, Caimmi Silvia, Camargos Paulo, Canonica Walter, Cardona Vicky, Carlsen Kai-Hakon, Carr Warner, Casale Thomas, Cecchi Lorenzo, Chavannes Niels, Chivato Thomas, Chkhartishvili Ekaterine, Christoff George, Chu Derek, Cingi Cemal, Ciprandi Giorgio, Cirule Ieva, Correia de Sousa Jaime, Coste André, Cox Linda, Cruz Alvaro, Custovic Adnan, Darsow Ulf, De Blay Frédéric, Deleanu Diana, Demoly Pascal, Devillier Philippe, Didier Alain, Djukanovic Ratko, Do Ceu Teixeira Maria, Dokic Dejan, Dubakienė Ruta, Durham Stephen, Eklund Patrik, El-Gamal Yehia, Emuzyte Regina, Esser-von Bieren Julia, Fiocchi Alessandro, Fokkens Wytske, Fonseca Joao, Gaga Mina, Gálvez Romero José Luis, Gemicioglu Bilun, Genova Sonya, Gereda José, Gomez Maximiliano, Gotua Maia, Grisle Ineta, Guidacci Marta, Haahtela Tari, Hejjaoui Adnan, Hossny Elham, Hourihane Jonathan, Hrubíško Martin, Huerta Villalobos Yunuen, Iaccarino Guido, Irani Carla, Ispayeva Zhanat, Ivancevich Juan-Carlos, Jares Edgardo, Jassem Ewa, Jensen-Jarolim Erika, Joos Guy, Jung Ki-Suck, Just Jocelyne, Kaidashev Igor, Kalayci Omer, Kalyoncu Fuat, Kardas Przemyslaw, Karjalainen Jussi, Khaltaev Nikolai, Kleine-Tebbe Jorg, Koppelman Gerard, Kowalski Marek, Kuitunen Mikael, Kuna Piotr, Kvedariene Violeta, Latiff Amir, Lau Susanne, Le Lan, Lessa Marcus, Levin Michael, Li Jing, Lieberman Philip, Lipworth Brian, Lodrup Carlsen Karin, Mahboub Bassam, Makela Mika, Malling Hans-Jorgen, Marshall Gailen, Martins Pedro, Masjedi Mohammad, Matta Juan-José, Meço Cem, Melén Erik, Meltzer Eli, Merk Hans, Michel Jean-Pierre, Mihaltan Florin, Miculinic Neven, Mohammad Yousser, Molimard Mathieu, Morais-Almeida Mario, Mösges Ralph, Mullol Joaquim, Münter Lars, Muraro Antonella, Mustakov Tihomir, Naclerio Robert, Nakonechna Alla, Namazova-Baranova Leyla, Nekam Kristof, Nicod Laurent, O'Hehir Robyn, Ohta Ken, Okamoto Yoshitaka, Okubo Kimihiro, Oliver Brian, Paggiaro Pier Luigi, Pali-Schöll Isabella, Panzner Petr, Papadopoulos Nilos, Park Hae Sim, Pereira Ana, Pfaar Oliver, Pigearias Bernard, Pitsios Constantinos, Plavec Davor, Pohl Wolfgang, Popov Todor, Portejoie Fabienne, Potter Paul, Poulsen Lars, Prokopakis Emmanuel, Rabe Claus, Recto Marysia Stella, Rimmer Janet, Rizzo José Angelo, Roberts Graham, Roche Nicolas, Romano Antonino, Rosado-Pinto Jose, Rosario Nelson, Rosenwasser Lanny, Rouadi Philip, Ryan Dermot, Sanchez-Borges Mario, Sastre-Dominguez Joaquin, Scadding Glenis, Serrano Elie, Siafakas Nikolaos, Simons Estelle, Sisul Juan-Carlos, Solé Dirceu, Sooronbaev Talant, Soto-Martinez Manuel, Stellato Cristiana, Stelmach Rafael, Strandberg Timo, Suppli Ulrik Charlotte, Thijs Carel, Tomazic Peter-Valentin, Toppila-Salmi Sanna, Triggiani Massimo, Tsiligianni Ioana, Urrutia Pereira Marilyn, Valovirta Erkka, Van Ganse Eric, van Hage Marianne, Vandenplas Olivier, Ventura Maria-Teresa, Vidgren Petra, Wagenmann Martin, Wallace Dana, Wang de Yun, Wasserman Susan, Wickman Magnus, Williams Dennis, Yawn Barbara, Yorgancioglu Arzu, Yusuf Osman, Zernotti Mario, Zidarn Mihaela, Zuberbier Torsten.

A novel strain of human coronaviruses, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), named by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) (1), has emerged and caused an infectious disease recently referred to as “coronavirus disease 2019” (COVID-19) by the World Health Organization (WHO). Since the first report of this disease in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (2, 3), COVID-19 has aggressively spread across the globe. WHO declared it a pandemic on March 11.

COVID-19 presents with many different clinical manifestations, ranging from asymptomatic cases to mild and severe disease, with or without pneumonia (4). Patients with common allergic conditions do not develop additional distinct symptoms and do not seem to be at an increased risk of severe disease. Allergic children show a mild course, like the rest of the children (5). COVID-19 cases with pre-existing COPD, or complicated by secondary bacterial pneumonia, are more severe and this may be due to a complex immune pathogenesis.

Whether systemic corticosteroids have a deleterious effect on COVID-19 infection is still a matter of discussion. Clinical evidence does not support corticosteroid treatment for SARS-CoV-2 pneumonia (6). Moreover, corticosteroid therapy in patients with MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) was not associated with a difference in mortality after adjustment for time-varying confounders but was associated with delayed MERS coronavirus RNA clearance (7). In accordance with current WHO guidance (8), it has been proposed that corticosteroids should not be used for SARS-CoV-2 -induced lung injury or shock, except in the setting of a clinical trial. However, a team of front-line physicians from China had a different perspective (9). Given the inconclusive evidence and urgent clinical demand, physicians from the Chinese Thoracic Society have developed an expert consensus statement on the use of corticosteroids in SARS-CoV-2 pneumonia that may allow the restricted use of low doses of corticosteroids for a short duration (10).

Concerning inhaled corticosteroids in asthma, the Global INitiative for Asthma (GINA) recently stated the following (<https://ginasthma.org/recommendations-for-inhaled-asthma-controller-medications/>): “Some sources have suggested that “corticosteroids” should be avoided during the for SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. This advice is about the use of oral corticosteroids unless there is a clear indication for their use. However, **patients with asthma should not stop their prescribed inhaled corticosteroid controller medication (or prescribed oral corticosteroids)**. Stopping inhaled corticosteroids often leads to potentially dangerous worsening of asthma, and avoiding oral corticosteroids during severe asthma attacks may have serious consequences. Long-term oral corticosteroids may sometimes be required to treat severe asthma, and it may be dangerous to stop them suddenly. Always discuss with your doctor or nurse before stopping **any** asthma medication. **Keep taking your inhaled asthma controller medication, and if your**

asthma gets worse, follow the instructions on your asthma action plan for how to change your asthma medications and when to seek medical help.”

Some scientific societies have made recommendations for anosmia and have proposed the use of intra-nasal corticosteroids. However, the French Agency (Direction Générale de la Santé) has contra-indicated their use in anosmia and aguesia without nasal obstruction (11). They have extended the contra-indication to saline washing since these could promote viral dissemination.

ARIA and EAACI have followed the example of the Dutch ENT Society and sent a questionnaire to all ARIA members regarding recommendations for allergic rhinitis and anosmia. ARIA and EAACI are proposing a joint statement following the results of the questionnaire.

Anecdotal evidence

In the Wuhan Children's hospital, there were about 40 paediatric COVID-19 cases with AR. Among these cases, approximately one third used intranasal steroids regularly as before, the other two thirds did not. It was observed in these two patient groups that there was no difference in the severity and prognosis of COVID-19, and that all of them recovered well. (Personal communication Yadong Gao and Hui Du, Unpublished data).

Questionnaire

A Delphi process was initiated by Anna Bedbrook who sent the 3 questions proposed by the Dutch ENT Society to the entire ARIA database (509 members, 84 countries), asking members to agree, somewhat disagree or completely disagree. After 48 hours, 209 replies were received from 61 countries (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Q3 led to too many unanswered comments and could not be considered. Moreover, the scientific basis for this recommendation is lacking.

Figure 1: List of countries

Recommendations

With the current knowledge, in patients with COVID-19 infection, intra-nasal corticosteroid (including spray) can be continued in allergic rhinitis at the recommended dose

Stopping local intra-nasal corticosteroid is not advised. Suppression of the immune system has not been proven and more sneezing after stopping means more spreading of the Corona virus

These recommendations are conditional since there is a paucity of data and they should be revised regularly with new knowledge

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Table 1: Results of the questionnaire

Q		Agree	Somewhat disagree	Completely disagree	No answer
1	Currently, nasal corticosteroid spray can be continued in the hay fever season	175 (91.6%)	4 (2.2%)	3 (1.5%)	9 (4.7%)
2	Stopping local nasal corticoid spray is not advised: suppression of the immune system has not been proven and more sneezing after stopping means more spreading of the Corona virus	173 (90.6%)	4 (2.2%)	3 (1.5%)	11 (5.8%)
3	Prescribing local nasal spray against anosmia due to Corona infection does not make sense	100 (51.6%)	3 (1.5%)	0	88 (47.5%)

Figure 1: List of countries with at least one answer to the questionnaire

