

S.African pharma giant to 'ramp up' dexamethasone production

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Dexamethasone, a commonly-used steroid, can help critically-ill COVID-19 patients, according to a new study

South African pharmaceutical giant Aspen Pharmacare has said that it is ready to scale up production of a generic anti-inflammatory drug that

could help save the lives of critically ill coronavirus patients.

A mass treatment trial led by Oxford University this week found that a low-dose steroid named [dexamethasone](#) could reduce mortality among ventilated patients by a third.

Durban-based Aspen, the largest [drug](#) producer in Africa, will now "ramp up production" of the drug, Aspen senior executive Stavros Nicolaou said in an interview Thursday night.

Dexamethasone has been on the market for over 60 years and usually serves to reduce inflammation.

"We are still getting to terms with what the global demands will be," Nicolaou said.

"Obviously, if this surges through the roof, you are going to have some constraints."

The company currently manufactures dexamethasone tablets in Germany and contracts the drug's injectable form to third parties.

The World Health Organization has flagged further research on the cheap and widely available steroid as a "priority", which is likely to lead to a surge in demand.

Aspen's shares on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange soared to a three-month high after the study's release on Tuesday.

"What this does for us, more importantly, is that it allows Aspen to continue playing a leading role in the South African COVID response and also more broadly in other countries," Nicolaou said, adding that the company has already been helping with coronavirus outbreaks across the

world.

Established in 1850, Aspen has been a major supplier of anaesthetics to European countries fighting COVID-19.

"Anaesthetics are an important portfolio of products for COVID so we were able to make a difference for patients," Nicolaou explained.

"We will now again be able to make a difference with dexamethasone."

South Africa's [health ministry](#) has recognised the Britain-led dexamethasone trials as an "important breakthrough" that would be "easily implementable in our country".

"The Department of Health... has recommended that dexamethasone can be considered for use on patients on ventilators and on [oxygen supply](#)," President Cyril Ramaphosa said in an address to the nation this week.

"We believe that this will improve our management of the disease among those who are most severely affected."

"It is quite exciting," Health Minister Zweli Mkhize said on SABC national television, "because licences to do this drug all over the world are owned by a South African company."

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