

ISOTRETINOIN

Isotretinoin belongs to a class of medication called 'retinoids', meaning modified vitamin A.

Isotretinoin (when taken by mouth) works by reducing oil output from the oil glands, and unblocking dead skin cells from the oil ducts. Retinoids also have anti-inflammatory effects, but initially can cause a flare of inflammation by altering the environment of the hair follicle and oil duct.

The dose prescribed depends on body weight, the side effects experienced and response to treatment.

The duration of treatment varies but is usually 9- 12 months. The end point is clearance of acne for at least 2-3 months.

Isotretinoin is a very effective medication. Almost all cases acne will clear after an appropriate course. Recurrence of acne after completion of a full course is expected in 20-30% cases. This is more likely to happen if acne occurs at a young age or if acne is more severe. Some people are genetically predisposed to acne. Acne is also more likely to persist into adult life in women.

Other options for treatment should be considered. These include oral antibiotics, and antiandrogen or hormonal treatment (in women only). Topical treatment with retinoids and benzyol peroxide, sometimes combined with clindamycin can be very effective if used appropriately. Superficial peels, photodynamic therapy, laser and light treatments can be helpful in some situations.

Isotretinoin is **not** a treatment for scarring.

Isotretinoin is teratogenic. This means it causes serious birth defects if taken in pregnancy. Most females of child bearing age should use reliable hormonal methods of contraception such as the combined oral contraceptive pill , the implantable progesterone rod or intrauterine device. Combination with a barrier method such as condom or diaphragm is recommended but these methods are not reliable enough if used alone. If a (biologic) female is sexually active with a male partner, and not willing to use adequate contraception, absolute sexual abstinence is obligatory. If pregnancy occurs termination should be considered.

Precautions

- Isotretinoin cannot be taken with doxycycline or minocycline.
- Most topical treatment can be irritating and should be ceased.
- Vitamin A supplements should not be taken with isotretinoin.
- No waxing
- No tattoos
- No laser
- No threading, needling

- Do not take isotretinoin if you fly planes or planning to learn to fly.

Skin care while taking isotretinoin

Gentle skin care and careful sun protection are critical. See also the Acne Skin Care information sheet.

- Eyes - lubricating eye drops, for dry eyes. If your eyes feel dry, use these frequently. Special care needs to be taken if you use contact lenses. It is recommended that you only wear these if necessary. If you develop severely dry eyes, Dr Drummond should be informed, and the dose of isotretinoin be reduced. It is helpful to see an optometrist.
- Lips - regular use of bland lip balm (avoid those with flavours or fragrances).
- Nose – plain Vaseline can be applied on a cotton bud.
- Gentle cleanser - should be soap and fragrance free. Antibacterial and salicylic acid cleansers can be used, provided they are also soap and fragrance free.
- Oil free moisturizer
- Sun protection. Sunscreen should be oil free and for sensitive skin. In addition to sunscreen (wear a hat, seek shade and avoid sun when UV index is high)
- Make up should be oil free.
- You can colour, straighten or curl your hair.
- Isotretinoin can be taken with medications for depression, anxiety and ADHD.

Expected side effects

The vast majority of people who take isotretinoin have manageable and expected side effects.

- Flare of acne when isotretinoin is commenced. This is usually mild. If there is any concern, or if acne becomes tender, painful, crusted or pustular stop isotretinoin, and contact Dr Drummond for further advice. When acne is severe, flare is predictable and preventive treatment may be given (including oral antibiotics (erythromycin, trimethoprim) or oral steroid . If this is the case, the starting dose of isotretinoin is very low .
- Dryness of lips, eyes, nose and skin. This is manageable with moisturisers (see section on skin care).
- Sensitivity to sunlight. Take sensible precautions to prevent sunburn.
- Muscle aching. If this occurs it usually occurs after a heavy exercise session, often in the gym.

Rare side effects

These occur only very occasionally. If there is any concern, please withhold the medication and contact Dr Drummond.

- Mood changes including depression, anxiety, anger. This can be very randomly triggered in someone with no previous history of a mood disorder or be aggravated in those with a pre-existing problem. Usually, however improvement in acne leads to improvement of mood. Other issues contribute to mood including age, school, friends and family.
- Headaches are of concern if there is a new pattern, frequent, early morning, or associated with dizziness and visual disturbance.
- Eyes – retinal effects can occur but rare. This is why isotretinoin cannot be taken by airline pilots.
- Muscles and joint inflammation can rarely be severe.
- Nausea and abdominal pain, liver inflammation
- Raised blood lipids (triglycerides rather than cholesterol).
- Hair shedding

Other even rarer side effects have been reported. This list is non inclusive.