

Experts in Skin & Hair

Acne: Isotretinoin common questions

What is isotretinoin?

Isotretinoin is a type of prescription medication called a retinoid, a derivative of Vitamin A and is used in the management of Acne, Rosacea and Folliculitis.

I've read lots of stories on the internet, should I be worried and is it worth it?

There are lots of very negative stories about this particular medication, most of which are not scientifically reviewed and are anecdotal. We would recommend avoiding searching randomly online and use reputable information leaflets by independent dermatology societies such as the British Association of Dermatologists. These will give a more balanced view.

The major advantage of this medication is the long-term improvement in moderate to severe acne, adult-onset acne or acne resistant to normal treatments. Other treatments tend to cause more temporary improvement, which is acceptable in adolescent acne when there is a good chance of growing out of acne, but less so in these other types.

What are the commonest side effects?

Everybody on this medication tends to get dry lips, dryness inside the nose (which can sometimes cause minor nose bleeds) and dry skin, particularly of the wrists and forearms. Muscle aches are quite common, especially in people that like to go to the gym and do weights. They are less of an issue for normal aerobic exercise eg running.

You will need a good lip salve product, eg Vaseline or Cicaplast Levres by La Roche Posay or Superbalm by Clinique. The moisturiser for the face should be one aimed at acne prone skin without any additional acne active treatments, eg Effaclar H. For the body, you can use a much thicker emollient for dry skin.

How likely is it that my mood will be affected?

It is very unlikely that your mood will be adversely affected but this is a potential side effect and past mood problems is a poor predictor, eg it can happen in someone that has never had mood problems before. This side effect is usually dose related. It is uncommon and probably affects less than 1 in 20 and a dose reduction is usually sufficient. One has to weigh up the risks and benefits of any medication and it is important to realise that untreated and persistent acne often has a very negative impact on mood and self-esteem and doing something positive for the skin can actually have a real benefit to these!

Do I have to stop my other treatments?

Yes. You must stop any tetracycline antibiotics (lymecycline or doxycycline) as these interact with Isotretinoin. It is safe and sometimes desirable to continue erythromycin or clarithromycin. The active topical treatments will often be too harsh whilst you are on Isotretinoin, as the skin becomes much more sensitive.



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Can I drink alcohol?

Some dermatologists recommend stopping all alcohol. This is because the drug is metabolised by the liver and liver function is affected by alcohol. Drinking occasionally is usually fine but binge drinking, getting drunk, drinking excessively is not!

What do I do when I am going on holiday?

Isotretinoin makes you much more sensitive to the sun. It lowers the threshold that you may burn at. For example, if you could normally tolerate 20 minutes of Midday sun, this may decrease to 10 minutes. Sun avoidance or suitable sun protection is therefore advised.

Can I shave or wax as normal?

Isotretinoin impairs wound healing and therefore you should avoid anything too traumatic to the skin. Waxing is best avoided. Shaving is normally ok.

I am wanting to get a tattoo. Is this ok on treatment?

If you want to get a tattoo, this is best deferred until at least a month after completion of treatment.

How long is a course of treatment and how soon will I see improvement?

Most courses of treatment are 5-7 months long. It does depend on what dose you start on and how quickly the dose is increased and this is based on side effects. The length of course is also related to weight and response. The speed of response to treatment is variable. You should not expect to see that much change in the first two months. Some people do respond quicker noticing an improvement within a couple of weeks.



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Acne: Isotretinoin Common questions for female patients

What is the pregnancy prevention programme (PPP) and what does it entail?

The Pregnancy Prevention Programme is a system to ensure females of childbearing age do not get pregnant during the course of treatment and one month beyond. This is because this medication is teratogenic meaning it will cause severe birth defects in the developing foetus. All females from the moment periods start until menopause are included.

You have to complete a monthly urine or blood pregnancy test and providing this is negative, will be limited to a 30 day supply of medication. The prescription will only be valid for 7 days after the date of the pregnancy test.

The manufacturers of Isotretinoin recommend one highly reliable form of contraceptive (Implant, IUD, depot) or two less reliable forms (contraceptive pill and barrier contraception).

If I'm not in a relationship at the moment, do I still need to go into the PPP?

For females who are not sexually active or choose to abstain or those in a same sex relationship can choose to be exempt from the PPP. In this situation pregnancy tests are not necessary and the prescriptions do not need to be limited to 30 days.

If I have signed a disclaimer exempting me from the PPP and I enter a relationship, what do I do?

You must inform us of the change in circumstances and be enrolled into the PPP.

How do I test for pregnancy and how do I let you know?

The commonest pregnancy test is a urine kit that you can do at the clinic or at home. If you are doing it at home, you should take a picture of the pregnancy test, showing the result alongside the package that shows the batch number. These images can be emailed secretary@expertinskinandhair.co.uk.

What do I do if I have a positive pregnancy test?

You must let us know straight away. We will arrange an urgent appointment and we can discuss the appropriate measures.

Do I need to be seen in clinic every month if I am in the PPP?

You will need an appointment on a monthly basis as part of the PPP. This does not need to be a physical appointment at the hospital. We offer monthly video or telephone appointments for patients on isotretinoin, which is more convenient and cheaper than hospital face to face appointments.

