

Acne and Isotretinoin: Using Isotretinoin the Right Way

What is isotretinoin?

Isotretinoin (brand name: Accutane) is a medicine used to treat very bad acne. It is usually used for acne that did not get better after treatment with other medicines. It is important for you to take isotretinoin the right way. You should also know about the side effects of isotretinoin. Talk to your doctor if you have any questions about this medicine or if you have side effects when you take it.

General Information

You should take isotretinoin with food. You don't have to keep the medicine in the refrigerator, but keep it out of sunlight. Don't keep it in a place that is very warm.

Isotretinoin has been prescribed just for you. Don't share it with other people. Keep isotretinoin away from children. You may not give blood while you are taking this medicine or for at least 1 month after you stop taking it. You should also not have cosmetic procedures done to smooth your skin (such as waxing) while you are taking isotretinoin and for at least 6 months after you stop.

Before Treatment Starts

Tell your doctor if you or anyone in your family has diabetes, asthma, liver disease, heart disease or depression. You should also tell your doctor if you are allergic to any medicines, especially parabens (which are in the isotretinoin capsules). Be sure to tell your doctor if you are taking any other medicines, even over-the-counter medicines.

Isotretinoin is like vitamin A, so while you are taking isotretinoin, you should not take vitamin A pills or multivitamins that contain vitamin A. You should also not take any antibiotics without talking to your doctor first.

During Treatment

Your acne may get worse when you start using isotretinoin. This usually just lasts for a little while. If this happens to you, your doctor may have you use other medicines along with the isotretinoin in this stage.

The dosage of isotretinoin is different for each person. During your treatment, your doctor may change your dosage. Be sure to take isotretinoin just the way your doctor tells you. If you miss one dose, don't take extra the next time. You will probably take isotretinoin for 15 to 20 weeks.

Be sure you keep all of your appointments with your doctor. Your doctor needs to check on you often. He or she may check your cholesterol levels and your liver.

Side Effects

During treatment, you may have some of the following side effects. These side effects usually go away when you stop taking isotretinoin:

- Dry skin and lips. Your doctor can suggest lotions or creams to use.
- Fragile (easily injured) skin, itching or rash
- Increased sensitivity to the sun (easily sunburned)
- Peeling skin on your palms and soles
- Thinning hair
- Dry, red eyes. You may find that you can't wear your contact lenses during treatment.
- Nosebleeds
- Bleeding gums
- Pain in your muscles
- Decreased night vision. If you have any vision problems, you should stop taking isotretinoin and talk to your doctor right away.

A few people have even more serious side effects. If these problems aren't treated, they could last even after you stop taking isotretinoin. If you have any of the side effects listed below, stop taking isotretinoin and check with your doctor right away:

- Headaches, nausea, vomiting or blurred vision
- Depression or changes in your mood
- Feelings of sadness or irritability
- Unusual tiredness or lack of appetite
- Severe stomach pain, diarrhea or bleeding from your rectum
- Very dry eyes
- A yellow color in your skin or eyes, and dark yellow urine

After You Stop Taking Isotretinoin

Your skin might keep getting better even after you stop taking isotretinoin. Most of the side effects go away in a few days or weeks after you stop taking isotretinoin. If your side effects last for more than a few weeks after you stop taking this medicine, talk to your doctor.

Your acne may not get better the first time you use isotretinoin for 15 to 20 weeks. If you need to take isotretinoin again, you can start taking it 8 to 10 weeks after your first treatment is over. Do not give blood for at least 1 month after you stop taking isotretinoin.

For Girls and Women

You must not take isotretinoin if you are pregnant or if there is any chance you might get pregnant while taking this medicine!

Isotretinoin causes severe birth defects, including malformation of the head and face, mental retardation and severe internal defects of the brain, heart, glands and nervous system. It can also cause miscarriage, premature birth or death of the fetus.

You must use 2 forms of birth control at the same time for at least 1 month before you start taking isotretinoin and during the entire time you are taking this medicine. Keep using 2 forms of birth control for 1 month *after* you stop taking isotretinoin.

Your doctor will make sure you are not pregnant before you start taking isotretinoin. He or she will check again every month while you are taking it. You will be asked to read and sign a consent form to show that you understand the dangers of birth defects and agree to use 2 forms of birth control. If your period is late, stop taking isotretinoin and call your doctor right away.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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