

Accutane (isotretinoin)

Overview:

- Isotretinoin is an oral medication that is generally used to treat **severe or treatment-resistant acne**. It has been available in the U.S. since 1982. It is also used to treat a few other skin conditions.
- **Isotretinoin is a derivative of Vitamin A.** Vitamin A supplements should not be taken with isotretinoin.
- If oral antibiotics and topical medications are ineffective, then isotretinoin is often the only medication which will effectively treat acne.
- Isotretinoin is generally taken once daily with food. A course of isotretinoin is usually 4–6 months, then it is discontinued.
- **Isotretinoin is the only medication which is capable of “curing” acne; but keep in mind that most patients are not cured with isotretinoin. Acne is generally much less severe after a course of isotretinoin, however.**
- There are multiple “brands” of isotretinoin, including Sotret, Amnesteem, Claravis, and previously Accutane – they are all isotretinoin and are interchangeable.

Before starting, you should know:

- All patients who take isotretinoin will need to come in for an appointment **each month** while they are on it, in addition to having a **monthly blood test (preferably drawn 1–3 days BEFORE the office visit). There are no exceptions to this rule.**
- In addition, **every patient who takes isotretinoin must be registered with iPledge**, which is a national, mandatory registry of all patients who take isotretinoin. www.ipledgeprogram.com
- The use of isotretinoin is highly regulated, primarily because of its potential to cause birth defects if a woman gets pregnant **while** taking it. However, isotretinoin does not alter the child bearing potential of a woman, nor does it increase the chance of birth defects if she gets pregnant more than one month **after** finishing it.
- **Women who are sexually active and decide to take isotretinoin must be on two forms of contraception, one of which must be hormonal (e.g., birth control pills).**

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Are there side effects?

Isotretinoin is generally well tolerated; it is actually uncommon that a patient discontinues a course due to an intolerable or serious side effect. However:

- Isotretinoin can **very rarely** cause serious side effects such as inflammation of the liver (hepatitis), inflammation of the pancreas (pancreatitis), hair loss, depression, bone problems, increased fluid around the brain, etc. This is why patients on isotretinoin must have office visits and blood tests monthly.
- Many patients who take isotretinoin will experience an increase in their cholesterol levels (especially triglycerides) **while** taking it, which is monitored by blood tests. Fat and sugar in the diet both exacerbate this; a low-sugar, low-fat diet reduces this tendency. If triglycerides become too high, they can irritate the liver and cause pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas).
- Older data offered a possibility that isotretinoin might increase the risk of inflammatory bowel disease, but recent evidence discounts that possibility. You still might read about that possibility.
- **The most common and expected side effects of isotretinoin are dry skin and chapped lips.** It is expected that every patient will experience this to some degree. This is usually manageable with moisturizers and lip balm. We carry Avène AC products, formulated to treat dry skin without disturbing the efficacy of isotretinoin.
- Acne can sometimes flare when isotretinoin is started, so it is usually initiated at a low dose, which is then increased depending on tolerance.
- Acne often does not improve on isotretinoin until the 3rd or 4th month. **It is often not the quickest fix, but it is the treatment most likely to provide a long-term solution.**
- **The potential link between isotretinoin and depression is controversial.** No one knows for sure if it causes depression, but a small percentage of patients do notice mood changes when they take isotretinoin, but not often. People have committed suicide while taking isotretinoin; it is not known if this has ever been due to the medication. If you notice a mood change while taking it, let us know!
- Some patients take a second course of isotretinoin due to a recurrence after their first course.
- **While taking isotretinoin you should avoid all elective surgical procedures.** Also, you should avoid laser treatment, chemical peels, tattoos, piercings and even waxing your eyebrows (plucking is usually OK).
- **If you develop any of the following you should stop taking isotretinoin and call us:** severe headaches, nausea/vomiting, hair loss, changes in your vision, feeling significantly sick in general, feeling depressed or any significant mood change.

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