Oral Isotretinoin

Information for patients
Dermatology
What is Isotretinoin?

Isotretinoin is one of a group of medicines known as retinoids, which are used to treat many skin problems.

They are derived from vitamin A. Isotretinoin is given as a course of treatment over several months. Until recently, only dermatologists could prescribe it. However, your GP is still unlikely to be able to prescribe it for the moment.

What is it used for?

Isotretinoin is used to treat severe acne which does not respond to normal acne treatments. It may be used in less severe acne if you are older (normally over 30 years), or if scarring is a problem.

Is it successful?

Most people are clear of their acne for many years after treatment, but this is not guaranteed. About a third of people get some acne back, but it is usually not as bad as it was previously.

What alternative treatments are there?

There is no other treatment for acne that has the potential to cure the acne. There are antibiotics by mouth (or oral contraceptives for women) and treatments on the skin that can be used to control acne. However, you will have tried some of these prior to being considered for Isotretinoin.

How does it work?

Isotretinoin works by reducing all four factors involved in the cause of acne. It reduces grease (sebum) production in the skin, inflammation, the formation of whiteheads and blackheads, and the numbers of bacteria present.
How should I take my medication?

Your medication should be taken once a day. It needs fat to be absorbed and therefore should always be taken after food as this maximises its absorption. The tablets should be swallowed whole and not sucked or chewed.

Your acne will be more likely to return if you do not take the full course, so you must make sure that you attend all your clinic appointments.

If you are a woman of child-bearing age, you should already be using an effective method of contraception. **You should start taking your medication on the 2nd or 3rd day of your menstrual cycle.**

When must Isotretinoin not be used?

- If you are pregnant or think you may be pregnant
- If you are breastfeeding
- If you are allergic to this medicine (NB Isotretinoin contains soya or peanut oil)

When should you be extra careful when taking Isotretinoin?

- When you have high levels of cholesterol or triglycerides (a fat-like substance) in your blood
- If you have diabetes. Isotretinoin may alter your blood sugar levels, so these may need monitoring during your treatment
- If you have epilepsy, it may increase your risk of fits
- If you regularly drink a lot of alcohol
- If you have a history of depression
- When you have liver or kidney disease
What are the possible unwanted effects of Isotretinoin?

**Pregnancy:** The most serious side effect is that Isotretinoin is teratogenic, which means that it will damage the unborn baby if taken during pregnancy. It may cause malformations of the heart, brain, eyes, ears or limbs. Women must not become pregnant whilst on the treatment or for 1 month after stopping the treatment. We ask young women of child bearing age to attend clinic monthly for a pregnancy test whilst on the treatment.

**Depression:** Some people experience changes in their mood and ability to concentrate. There have been a number of reported cases of people feeling depressed or suicidal. If you experience any changes in your moods you should report these to your doctor, as stopping taking the medication alone may not make your feelings go away.

**Liver and blood fats:** Inflammation of the liver and raised blood fats can occur. Your doctor will do blood tests to check your liver and blood fats before and during your course of treatment.

**Headaches:** These are common on Isotretinoin. However, please tell your doctor if you are waking up with a headache or if you experience headaches with changes in your vision, as this can indicate a change in the pressure of the fluid surrounding the brain.
**Other side effects:** Almost all patients have some unwanted reactions to treatment, even before they see their acne getting better. These effects often reduce as treatment continues and include:

- Dry lips and nose
- Dry skin and eczema
- Redness of the skin and easy burning in sunlight
- Eye irritation
- Muscle aches and pains
- Hair loss in 10% of patients (can also become curly)
- Skin fragility - do not wax or have dermabrasion during or for 6 months after treatment
- Skin infections, particularly around the nails
- Increased hair growth on the face
- Increased sweating
- Irregular or heavy periods
- Drowsiness
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea or inflammatory bowel disease
- A very rare skin condition called Stevens Johnson syndrome. This is a severe skin reaction that causes ulcers in the mouth, eyes and genitals.

Most unwanted effects disappear once the treatment course is over.

Rarely, there have been cases of increased bruising and bleeding more easily or increased levels of a substance called uric acid in your blood which, if you have gout, may bring on an attack. Very high uric acid levels may also affect your kidneys.

The number of white cells in your blood (cells which are involved in fighting off infections) may be reduced, so you may be more prone to infections.
Your sight may also be affected, particularly at night. If you have a job which depends on your ability to see at night e.g. pilot, taxi or coach driver, please think carefully before starting on this medication and discuss it with your dermatologist. If you do have problems with your night vision, you should report it immediately to your doctor and avoid driving and operating machinery, especially at night. You will need to report this to the DVLA if you have formal testing confirming reduced night vision. Isotretinoin may cause you to fail more detailed night vision tests required for flying an aeroplane or helicopter, even though you have not noticed changes to your night vision yourself. This persists long after the course of Isotretinoin treatment has finished.

**What are the chances of hair loss during treatment?**

Hair loss occurs in a minority of patients and is only temporary. Hair growth returns to normal within several weeks of treatment ending.

**Will I still have scars?**

Isotretinoin will not treat any existing scars or pitting, but it will prevent further damage to your skin.

**I have been taking Isotretinoin for a week and my acne has got worse. Should I stop taking it?**

For some people, acne can get worse in the first month of treatment but you should continue to take the treatment. Your dermatologist may prescribe a short course of steroids to prevent this from happening. If you are concerned you should ring our helpline.

**Can I use any other acne products whilst I am taking Isotretinoin?**

You should not use any other acne treatments unless specifically told to do so by your doctor.
Can I take antibiotics when I am on this treatment?

This is generally OK, but one group of antibiotics called tetracyclines should not be taken. You should always inform your doctor, dentist or pharmacist that you are taking Isotretinoin before he/she prescribes or advises any other medicines.

My eyes are sore since starting Isotretinoin and I cannot tolerate my contact lenses for as long as before. What should I do?

Your eyes may feel dry and irritated because of the drying effect of your medicine. Your pharmacist can suggest lubricating eyedrops to help with this problem. It may be necessary for you to cut down on the amount of time you wear your contact lenses, or you may be more comfortable wearing glasses during treatment.

Can I exercise as normal during treatment?

Some people have muscle aches and pains whilst taking Isotretinoin. This can happen in people who exercise regularly and in those who take no exercise. It is best not to increase the amount of exercise you do whilst on treatment.

Can I drink alcohol whilst on treatment?

You will probably be advised not to drink alcohol or to reduce the amount of alcohol you drink whilst on treatment. This is because of a possible effect on the liver and an increase in blood fats in some patients.
Can I continue to take vitamin supplements during treatment?

The only vitamin to be concerned about is vitamin A as this is related to your treatment. Do not take any vitamin A supplements at all.

Can I use a sunbed while I am taking the medication?

Isotretinoin can make the skin more likely to burn badly in sunlight, so you should not use a sunbed whilst on treatment.

Is it OK to go on holiday to an area with a hot and sunny climate?

It is advisable to apply a complete sun block to exposed skin before going out into strong sunlight as your treatment could make your skin more likely to burn badly in sunlight and you may develop a rash. Sunlight may also make you more likely to develop large brown patches on your face, which fade when you stop treatment.

I am going on holiday next month and have to have several vaccinations. Are there any vaccinations I cannot have?

There have been no reported reactions between Isotretinoin and any of the common vaccinations.

Can I take tablets to protect me against malaria whilst on holiday?

Yes, there have been no reported problems between anti-malarial tablets and Isotretinoin.
I am a woman: how long will it take for the Isotretinoin to be out of my system, as I wish to start a family and need to avoid any risk of damage to my baby?

Contraceptive precautions must be taken before, during and for one month after treatment. Isotretinoin is cleared from the body in 4 weeks, so there will be no increased risk of damage to the baby if you become pregnant more than 1 month after stopping Isotretinoin.

I am a man: do I need to use contraception?

Studies indicate that Isotretinoin therapy should not affect your ability to have healthy children now or in the future. However, you must not share your treatment with anyone else, particularly women.

If I have tablets left over from my treatment even if my course is finished, can I keep on using them?

Even when you have finished your course of treatment your acne may not completely clear for a few months. You should not continue taking Isotretinoin unless your dermatologist tells you to. Do not share your tablets with anyone else.

I am a blood donor. Can I continue to donate blood whilst on treatment?

You should not donate blood either during, or for at least 1 month after Isotretinoin treatment. If you do, your blood could be given to a pregnant woman and cause her to have a baby with a serious birth defect.
Who should I contact if I have any concerns?

We have a telephone helpline service:

- 0114 271 2018

This is a 24 hour answering machine, which is checked several times a day (Monday to Friday, 8.00am - 5.30pm).

Is there anything else I should know?

Please make sure that you also read the drug information leaflet that is enclosed in your packet of Isotretinoin.

Where can I find out more about Isotretinoin?

- www.dermnet.nz