

Isotretinoin

Isotretinoin is an oral capsule used to treat severe acne that has not responded to other treatments or is scarring or impacting on a person's psychological wellbeing. Isotretinoin is a type of retinoid, which is related to vitamin A. Vitamin A plays an important role in the development of the skin. Only a certified dermatologist can prescribe this medication. Take the isotretinoin exactly as directed by your dermatologist.

Isotretinoin is a highly successful treatment for acne. Most people need a course of isotretinoin lasting months (average 6 to 9 months). It takes, on average, at least 2 to 3 months on this treatment before there is a big improvement in the appearance of the skin. The treatment will not clear up scars that already present, however it may prevent further scars from occurring.

Take isotretinoin with food – it is best to take it in the morning. If you miss a dose, do not take extra capsules to make up for the missed dose.

What is it used for?

Isotretinoin is mainly used to treat severe or persistent or scarring acne.

It may be prescribed for other conditions that include:

- Seborrhoea (oily skin).
- Darier disease.
- Folliculitis.
- Pityriasis rubra pilaris.
- Rosacea.
- Hidradenitis suppurativa.
- Lupus erythematosus.
- Steatocystoma multiplex.
- Ichthyosis.

Monitoring

In general a blood test is required before and during treatment with isotretinoin. This is to check your blood count, your liver function and your cholesterol level (triglycerides). In females, a pregnancy test is also undertaken before and during treatment.

Precautions

Isotretinoin causes severe birth defects or miscarriage. **Under no circumstances should you fall pregnant on this drug. Use strict, reliable birth control methods for one month before, during treatment and for one month after treatment has ceased.** If you think you may be pregnant, stop taking the drug immediately and contact your dermatologist.

(Note: Isotretinoin does NOT affect male sperm or fertility)

- Do not give your medication to anyone else.
- Avoid excessive alcohol intake when taking this drug.
- Do not breastfeed on this medication.
- Avoid sunlight (UV radiation) during treatment. Always wear an oil-free "non-comedogenic" broad-spectrum sunscreen (SPF30+) to exposed skin.
- Don't take tetracycline antibiotics (eg. minomycin, doxycycline etc) when you are taking this medication because they interact. Check with your dermatologist that other medications you may be on do not interact with isotretinoin.
- **Avoid any other form of vitamin A** (vitamin tablets, creams etc).
- **You cannot donate blood whilst on this treatment** (because if your blood is given to a pregnant woman, it can cause birth defects).
- **It is best avoided in children less than 10 years old as it can stunt bone growth.**

What to expect on Isotretinoin and potential side effects

At the start, your acne may get worse. This is mainly during the first 2-4 weeks. Don't despair – it will get better! If you are suffering a severe flare-up (painful nodules or cysts) please let your dermatologist know.

The most common side effect of this treatment is dry skin. This can occur all over the body, but particularly affects the lips, nose and eye region. The skin may appear red, scaly and irritated. It may be itchy.

- Apply petrolatum jelly (Vaseline) or similar lip balm regularly to lips and nose (inside nostrils).
- Keep showers short and don't use very hot water.
- Avoid soaps / detergents / masks / exfoliating agents / toners / scrubs on your skin – this will only irritate and worsen the skin. Avoid other anti-acne creams, lotions, cleanses (unless advised by your dermatologist).
- For the face, cleanse once or twice daily with a gentle soap-free cleanser. Use a non-soap wash on the body. Use a moisturiser daily or twice daily if required.
- Use eye drops regularly if you get dry eyes. If you wear contact lenses you may notice you become intolerant to them – avoid wearing them if possible, or apply eye drops more regularly.

You may experience **increased sensitivity to the sun.** This makes you more likely to get sunburn. Ensure you stay out of the sun and keep your skin protected with clothing, hat, sunglasses and the use of a sunscreen.

Skin is generally more fragile on the treatment. You may notice peeling / scale or redness on the skin. Moisturise these areas more intensively.

- **Don't wax any part of the skin** whilst on the treatment.
- **It is best to avoid doing things such as laser, dermabrasion, chemical peels, tattoos, piercings and non-emergency surgery whilst on this treatment unless advised by your dermatologist.**

Other side effects include:

- Headaches (rarely but serious can be related to raised intracranial pressure).
- Changes in vision - blurred vision, reduced night vision, slow adaptation to the dark.
- Hair loss (usually temporary).
- Nose bleeds - this is related to dryness in the nasal passages.
- Vomiting, diarrhoea, bleeding from the bowel.
- Joint and/or muscle aches, especially after exercise. Rarely bone abnormalities (hyperostosis, DISH).
- Tiredness (lethargy).
- Facial redness and flushing (especially in fair skin).
- Raised blood fat (triglycerides).
- Paronychia (ingrown toenails).
- Liver toxicity (abnormal liver function) is very rare.

There are reports of mood change and depression in patients taking isotretinoin. Tell your dermatologist immediately if you notice a change in your mood on this treatment.

Tell your dermatologist if you experience these. In most cases, these improve when you stop treatment. **Other potential side effects have been reported. Please refer to the product information that is provided with the medication.** Ensure you have read this and understand it before taking this medication.

[This information leaflet was written by Dr Eleni Yiasemides of SouthDerm.](#)
