

Isotretinoin

Isotretinoin is the drug of choice for the treatment of severe, scarring acne that is unresponsive to traditional acne therapy. The drug has been shown to produce dramatic clearing of active acne lesions. Prolonged remissions are frequently obtained. It is important for you to understand this remarkable drug in order for us to work with you in its use.

The mechanism of action of Isotretinoin is not clearly understood. It appears to reduce the oil associated with acne, decrease the growth of certain bacteria, and help prevent the formation of the earliest acne lesions. The medicine is absorbed from the stomach into the blood stream. In order to increase the amount of medicine reaching the blood, we request that our patients take the Isotretinoin capsules with food. Depending on the weight of the patient, the medicine is given one to three times a day. The duration of therapy is typically 24 weeks. Although many patients may show signs of clearing of their active acne lesions before that time, we do recommend the 24-week course to try to prevent relapses when the medicine is discontinued. Drug interactions between Isotretinoin and other medications have not been reported, with the possible exception of tetracycline antibiotics (i.e. doxycycline or minocycline). We do, however, ask that our patients not take additional vitamin A in the form of multiple vitamins or vitamin A by itself. Since Isotretinoin will produce dryness of the skin, patients should discontinue all of their acne medications when starting Isotretinoin therapy.

Isotretinoin has also been reported to cause birth defects in infants born of mothers taking Isotretinoin during pregnancy. It is mandatory not to give the medicine to women who are pregnant or who may become pregnant during the therapy. While women are limited, there is no problem with men fathering children while they are on Isotretinoin or later on in life. A further discussion will be had with our female patients on the potential problems of birth defects. We recommend women of childbearing age either abstain from intercourse or use two forms of birth control while they are on Isotretinoin, and for one additional month after completing Isotretinoin. All studies indicate that one month after the completion of the course of Isotretinoin, women are not at a higher risk for having birth defects. We will work with you to provide the necessary information concerning birth control. Two monthly pregnancy tests are required before starting Isotretinoin therapy. Repeat urine pregnancy test are repeated monthly while on therapy and for two months after treatment is completed.

The most common side effects from Isotretinoin are dry skin and dry lips. Occasionally, patients will notice dry eyes, dry nose associated with minor nosebleeds, itching of the skin, a dry skin rash, or peeling of the palms and soles. We have prepared a separate handout concerning dry skin. We recommend to our patients that they regularly use moisturizers and to discontinue any astringents or skin fresheners that they may be using. For dry lips, we recommend using lubricants such as Aquaphor, Vaseline lip balm or Carmex. Patients may find that they will need to wash their hair less frequently. Over washing may produce dryness and itching that is similar to dandruff. Because some patients have described an increased sensitivity to sunlight during the treatment with Isotretinoin, we recommend that you use a moisturizing sunscreen that is SPF #15 or higher. This should be applied whenever you go out in the sun regardless of the season of the year. Of course, we do not recommend the use of sun tan parlors.

Occasionally, mild muscle aches and pains have been reported. Almost all of these patients can be treated with simple pain medications such as Tylenol, aspirin or ibuprofen. Those who engage in vigorous exercise (e.g. joggers, long distance runners, weight lifters, wrestlers, competitive ice skaters and ballet dancers) tend to have a greater degree of muscle pain during therapy.

Eyelid irritation, blurred vision, dry eyes, sunlight sensitivity and contact lens intolerance have also been reported. We recommend that irritation in the eyes be counteracted with the use of artificial tears, such as Tears Natural Free, Hypo Tears Free, Celluvise, Cellufresh, or Refresh eye drops. For patients with severe dry eyes, Refresh PM ointment can be applied at bedtime. Patients who use contact lenses should be aware that they will need to increase the use of artificial tears or other eye lubricants. These patients should also have a pair of glasses available in case severe intolerance occurs. Patients on Isotretinoin may notice difficulty seeing as clearly at night compared to daytime vision. We warn all of our patients to be careful with driving an automobile or operating any vehicle, especially at night if you notice any persistent eye problems, please feel free to discuss these issues with your physician.

Isotretinoin has been reported to increase blood fat, i.e. triglycerides and cholesterol. These are temporary elevations which are reversed when the medicine is discontinued. However, if there are high prolonged elevations of the triglycerides, patients may develop a skin rash or abdominal pain (pancreatitis). We, therefore, check blood tests before the therapy and during the therapy to make sure that these levels do not rise. For patients whose triglyceride level exceeds 250 mg. per 100 ml, we recommend the restricted adherence to a diet designed by the American Heart Association. We also recommend that alcoholic beverages be restricted or reduced. If the fat level continues to rise despite the dietary restrictions we will discontinue the medication.

Mild to moderate elevations of enzymes produced by the liver may occur in some patients. For this reason we will also check these values when we do blood tests. Occasionally, people with elevated liver enzymes may develop flu like illness. For this reason, if you develop symptoms of the flu we recommend that you stop medication and call our office.

Possible concerns to patients undergoing treatment with Isotretinoin are the reports of hair loss. A recent large study indicated no evidence of abnormal hair loss. In our experience, only a very few patients have noticed increased shedding of the hair, which is usually evident in the latter weeks after completing treatment. Regrowth of any hair loss would be expected after the treatment has been discontinued, but rare instances of persistent hair loss have been reported. If you have any concerns with a change in your hair, please feel free to discuss this with your physician.

Rarely, intestinal irritation has been seen in patients on Isotretinoin. If you experience abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, or severe diarrhea, we ask you to stop the medicine and call our office.

A very rare side effect of Isotretinoin that has been reported by some physicians is a temporary increase in pressure inside the brain. When this occurs, people can develop a severe headache. Although this is unlikely to happen, we ask patients to stop the medicine and call our office if they experience either a headache that lasts over 24 hours or a severe headache.

In order to follow our patients on Isotretinoin, we request that we see you frequently in the office. After your initial evaluation and blood test, we will see you back monthly. Blood tests for female patients are done on each office visit. For our male patients, we draw blood initially, and several times throughout the course of therapy. We wish to make this a worthwhile and rewarding experience for you. If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to call our office.