

Isotretinoin

What is isotretinoin and what is it used for?

Isotretinoin is a vitamin A-like drug that is widely prescribed by dermatologists for the treatment of acne. This information sheet will explain how to start treatment and answers some of the questions that we commonly get asked about isotretinoin.

Blood tests

Before starting isotretinoin, you will need to have a blood test to check that your lipids (cholesterol and triglyceride), kidney and liver function are normal. This test should be done after a 12-hour fast, during which you should have nothing to eat or drink from midnight until after you have the test except water. The blood test can be done in the Pathology Department (South Block, Royal Berkshire Hospital) between 9am and 4pm, Mondays to Fridays. There is no need to make an appointment. Alternatively, you may wish to ask your GP if they are willing to take your blood. An early morning appointment is more comfortable if you are fasting.

If you are a male, then after your blood test, please start taking isotretinoin as prescribed. In the unlikely event that your blood tests are abnormal, we will contact you and your doctor, but otherwise you will not be informed of the results.

If you are a woman of childbearing age who has not been sterilised

Isotretinoin may cause severe fetal malformations and deformities. Under the new legislations isotretinoin cannot be prescribed unless you have had a negative pregnancy test within 7 days of picking up the treatment for the first time and for each month of treatment. The result of your blood tests and the pregnancy test will be present in the pharmacy. If they are normal and the pregnancy test is negative then you will be given the tablets without question. However, the pharmacy will not give these results over the phone, even to you. You will be given four blood test forms, one for each month. In addition, you should only start isotretinoin once your next cycle has commenced. A blood pregnancy test is necessary, as urine pregnancy tests are unreliable.

You must strictly avoid pregnancy once you have started isotretinoin, and for 6 weeks after you have discontinued isotretanoin. Adequate contraceptive precautions should be taken at all times and for at least 4- 6 weeks before starting isotretanoin. The contraceptive pill/implant or injection is the most adequate option. We advise barrier contraception such as condoms in addition to the pill/implant or injection.

Treatment regimes

Isotretinoin tablets may be prescribed in a once or twice daily regime. The average length of treatment is for 20 weeks, but this may be shorter or longer according to your response to treatment. If you are already taking Minocin or another tetracycline antibiotic, your doctor will ask you to discontinue this when you start isotretinoin or shortly afterwards (within 1 to 2 weeks.) The treatment is to be taken with a fatty meal such as your evening meal as this helps it to absorb into the body and work more effectively.

Possible side effects of isotretinoin

Always ensure you carefully read the information leaflet that accompanies your medication.

Isotretinoin works by reducing the skin's sebum (grease) secretion, so you will notice that your skin becomes generally drier during treatment. This can be helped by using a good moisturiser to all the skin (e.g. Aveeno, E45 cream or Cetraben cream).

All patients experience dryness and cracking of the lips (cheilitis) while taking isotretinoin and we recommend that you use a lip salve, 'chap stick' or Vaseline/liquid paraffin preparation to help reduce any discomfort. Dryness can also affect the nostrils causing nose bleeds. These can be prevented by applying a little petroleum jelly/Vaseline just inside the nostrils with a clean fingertip or cotton bud.

You will be more prone to sunburn while taking isotretinoin, so we advise you to avoid sunbathing. You should use a high factor sunscreen if outside (SPF 30+) and cover up with clothing, hat and sunglasses. If you are going on a sunny holiday, you may wish to delay starting treatment until your return.

The serious side effects that are mentioned on the information that accompanies the isotretinoin are rare, but if in doubt please consult your GP.

For female patients, it is essential to remember that pregnancy should be avoided during and six weeks after treatment, and that under no circumstances must these tablets be given to anyone else.

Follow-up clinic appointments

Every patient taking isotretinoin should have a follow up appointment with the dermatology nurses 4 or 8 weeks after starting treatment. You will be sent a letter with this appointment. This is an opportunity to discuss side effects and for the nurses to assess how the isotretinoin is working for you.

Contact us

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