

CANADIAN DERMATOLOGY ASSOCIATION FACT SHEET

ISOTRETINOIN FOR THE TREATMENT OF ACNE

Isotretinoin has been used in Canada since 1983. It is a very effective drug for the treatment of acne that does not respond to other treatments and is effective in preventing the scarring associated with acne. However, isotretinoin can cause birth defects and have other serious adverse effects. As such, its use has traditionally been reserved for severe cases of acne or for patients who do not respond to other treatments.

Dermatologists are now starting to use isotretinoin more widely. This is partially due to the increasing occurrence of antibiotic resistant bacteria associated with the widespread use of antibiotics to treat acne and many other conditions. Also, isotretinoin is the only acne therapy that actually causes the development of acne to be reversed rather than by just suppressing the symptoms. The significant and lifelong impact of acne scarring is also better recognized now and there is a greater desire to avoid scarring when possible.

For these and other reasons experienced dermatologists now consider prescribing isotretinoin more quickly after the diagnosis of acne and for less severe cases.

Any treatment plan for acne involves a number of steps that may or may not include the use of isotretinoin. These may include modifying diet, procedural therapies, a focus on skin care, and avoiding products and practices likely to promote acne.

Birth defects in children born to women using isotretinoin is by far the most serious and widely-known side effect. For this reason, extreme caution is taken in prescribing the drug to girls or women who are able to become pregnant. Before being prescribed isotretinoin, these patients may be required to sign a consent form and will receive extensive counselling as well as ensuring that they are using appropriate contraceptive methods while taking the drug.

Canada has instituted a pregnancy prevention program and requires isotretinoin manufacturers to provide comprehensive information about the potential risks of isotretinoin, information on birth control options, the Pregnancy Prevention checklist for patients, patient consent form, and a treatment checklist for physicians.

Isotretinoin has been associated with worsening of the risk of depression or an increase in suicidal thoughts. However, there is no scientific evidence to support this association. In fact, a number of studies have shown that successful treatment of acne can reduce symptoms of depression.

In addition to causing birth defects, other side effects of isotretinoin include drying of the skin or mucosa, muscle pain and headache. As a result, a certified dermatologist will likely require appropriate laboratory tests to monitor patients using the drug in addition to routine pregnancy testing in women. These will include routine testing of cholesterol levels and liver function before and after starting use of isotretinoin.

Please feel free to discuss the contents of this fact sheet with your certified dermatologist.

The Canadian Dermatology Association's mission is to promote the highest quality standards of dermatologic care in Canada. Part of this mission is to help ensure that patients are prescribed safe and effective medications.

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