

# Isotretinoin and mental health

This information is for people who are thinking about taking the drug isotretinoin for their acne. Isotretinoin is also known by the brand names Roaccutane or Accutane.

This information looks at isotretinoin and mood changes. It explains the mental health problems that some people have reported whilst taking isotretinoin, and after stopping isotretinoin. It also looks at how frequently these problems have been reported, and what to do if you experience them.

## About our information

We publish information to help people understand more about mental health and mental illness, and the kind of care they are entitled to.

Our information isn't a substitute for personalised medical advice from a doctor or other qualified healthcare professional. We encourage you to speak to a medical professional if you need more information or support. Please [read our disclaimer](#).

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## What is isotretinoin?

Isotretinoin belongs to a group of drugs called retinoids. It is a highly-effective treatment for:

severe acne that is resistant to standard antibiotics and topical treatments

(medications that are put directly onto the skin)  
acne that is at risk of causing permanent scarring

Isotretinoin comes as a capsule and is usually taken once a day.

In the UK, isotretinoin can only be prescribed by healthcare professionals working within a team that is led by a consultant dermatologist or a GP with extra nationally accredited training. If you are prescribed isotretinoin, you should be told about any potential risks and monitored during your treatment.

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## How is isotretinoin linked to mood?

Isotretinoin is related to vitamin A. High doses of vitamin A can sometimes cause problems like:

depression  
tiredness  
irritability  
changes in behaviour.

Because of this there have been concerns that isotretinoin might cause some of these problems.

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## Should I take isotretinoin?

In this resource we have tried to present the research available on mood changes and isotretinoin. We hope that this information will help you to make decisions about your treatment. However, any decisions you make about your treatment should be based on conversations with your healthcare professional, and your individual circumstances.

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## **Does isotretinoin cause mood changes?**

Isotretinoin was first approved for the treatment of acne in the 1980s. Millions of people around the world have had their acne treated with isotretinoin without any problems.

However, over the years some people have reported changes in their mood while taking isotretinoin. This suggests that there might be an association between isotretinoin and mental health problems, but it isn't known for certain if this is the case.

Recent studies of large numbers of people of different ages who were taking isotretinoin did not show an increase in depression or suicide. This was studied by comparing these people with:

the general population and  
people with acne who were treated with antibiotics.

In fact, suicide is reported more commonly in people with acne who have not had isotretinoin than in people who are treated with it.

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## **How often do people taking isotretinoin experience mood or behavioural changes?**

The exact frequency of mental health problems in people taking isotretinoin is unknown.

The chance that someone who is taking isotretinoin will experience mood changes is very low. It is estimated that between 1 in 1,000 and 1 in 10,000 people taking isotretinoin might experience small changes in their mental wellbeing, including:

tearfulness  
low mood  
anxiety  
agitation.

The chance that someone who is taking isotretinoin will experience more serious mood and behaviour changes is thought to be even lower. It is estimated that fewer than 1 in 10,000 people taking isotretinoin might:

experience depression  
behave unusually  
show signs of psychotic illness like losing contact with reality or hearing voices  
have suicidal thoughts  
harm themselves or attempt suicide  
die by suicide.

These feelings and behavioural changes have been reported in people who have had mental health problems in the past, and in people who haven't. They have happened while people are taking isotretinoin, and after they have stopped taking it.

Some people have reported becoming depressed while taking isotretinoin. In some cases, these people found that their depression improved when the isotretinoin was stopped, and returned when it was restarted. This would suggest that the depression developed because of the isotretinoin. In other cases, these people found that their depression did not return when isotretinoin was restarted.

It is important to understand that depression is a common illness. This makes it very hard to say whether people taking isotretinoin who develop depression do so because they are taking isotretinoin, or if it is coincidental.

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## **What are the links between mental health problems and acne?**

We know that people with acne are more likely to have anxiety and depression than people without acne. This is the case whether they are taking isotretinoin or not. One of the main reasons for this is that acne and acne scars affect self-esteem and self-confidence. This can lead to low mood, especially in younger people.

There have been several studies showing that isotretinoin can improve negative mood changes caused by acne. Where isotretinoin helps to improve acne, this can have a positive impact on someone's self-esteem and self-confidence.

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## **What if I have had mental health problems before?**

There is no evidence to suggest that people with a history of depression are at a higher risk of developing mood changes when taking isotretinoin.

However, while people who have had depression in the past can be treated with isotretinoin, this should be done with caution.

If you have had depression and decide to take isotretinoin, your dermatologist is likely to start you at a lower dose and increase it slowly as needed. They will frequently check how you are feeling.

There are reports of people who have bipolar disorder becoming more unwell while taking isotretinoin. If you have bipolar disorder, you might be advised to not take isotretinoin.

A recent study looked at people who attempted suicide whilst taking isotretinoin. It showed that they were more likely to have risk factors such as a personal or family history of mental illness. This makes it difficult to know whether isotretinoin was the direct cause of the problem.

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## **What should happen before I start taking isotretinoin?**

Tell the person treating you if you or anyone in your family have ever experienced any mental health problems. This includes:

**depression**

**bipolar disorder**

**eating disorders**

**anxiety**

## **self-harm**

body dysmorphic disorder.

You should also let them know if you are under the care of a mental health professional or team. The person prescribing you isotretinoin will ask you to fill in a questionnaire that helps to screen for mental health problems.

If you have experienced mental health problems in the past, the person prescribing you isotretinoin might ask you to see your GP. By making sure your GP knows that you are thinking of taking isotretinoin, they can:

- help you to decide whether it is safe for you to take isotretinoin
- help to monitor your mood during the treatment
- help you to get any other treatment and support you might need.

Anyone who is prescribed isotretinoin should:

receive information about the benefits and risks of isotretinoin, including the risks of possible mental health side effects and sexual function side effects

have their mental health assessed prior to starting treatment

be given time to consider, reflect and ask questions before treatment is started.

You should also be given an 'acknowledgement of risk' form and a 'patient reminder card', and if there is a possibility you could become pregnant you must be entered into the Pregnancy Prevention Programme.

For anyone under the age of 18 to be prescribed isotretinoin, two independent healthcare professionals must agree that there is no other appropriate effective treatment.

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## **What should I do if I have started taking isotretinoin?**

**Speak to anyone involved in your care** - If you are under the care of a mental health professional or team, you should let them know that you are

taking isotretinoin.

**Be aware of any symptoms** - Be aware of the symptoms of depression listed further on in this resource. If you experience any changes to your thoughts, feelings or behaviours, speak to the people who are treating you.

**Speak to your family and friends** - It can be useful to tell your family and friends that you are taking isotretinoin and that one of the possible side effects is mood changes. Ask them to let you know if they notice any changes in your mental health so you can report it to the healthcare professionals looking after you.

You should have a review with a dermatology healthcare professional approximately one month after starting treatment, then at least once every three months.

At each follow-up appointment you should be asked about your mental health and sexual function. You may be asked to complete a questionnaire about how you have been feeling. This should not replace telling the healthcare professional how you are feeling.

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## **What should I do if my mood changes while I'm taking isotretinoin?**

If you or someone you know thinks your mood or behaviour is changing and you are showing any signs of a mental illness:

stop the medication immediately

inform your GP and your dermatology team. Their contact details will be on your Patient Reminder card.

if you are under the care of a mental health service, let them know too.

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## **If this happens, can I start taking isotretinoin again?**

Some people choose to restart isotretinoin after their mood has improved or if their symptoms of depression are mild. Usually, they would restart isotretinoin at a lower dose.

If you do start isotretinoin again, your dermatology healthcare professional or GP might refer you to a mental health professional. You might be offered **antidepressants** or **a psychological therapy** if you are restarting isotretinoin, as these can help to stop you from becoming depressed again.

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## **How would I know if I was becoming depressed?**

We all feel fed up and sad at times. With depression these feelings don't go away after a few days and instead carry on and get in the way of life. If you are depressed, you may experience symptoms like:

feeling unhappy

losing interest in life

not being able to enjoy anything

having trouble concentrating

finding it harder to cope with challenges

losing confidence and avoiding social situations

feeling anxious and on edge

feeling irritable

sleeping too much or not enough

changes in your appetite and weight

feeling useless and hopeless

thinking of suicide.

Find out more about **depression in adults** and **depression in children and young people**.

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## **What should I do if I have thoughts of suicide, self-harm or hurting myself?**

If you feel you are at risk of hurting yourself, **call 999** or go to your nearest A&E.

If you are not in an emergency but need help, **call NHS 111**.

If you are under the care of a local mental health service, you can also contact your local support line if you know the number. NHS 111 can also put you in touch with them.

You can also contact the **Samaritans**, a national organisation that support people in distress or who feel suicidal and need someone to talk to.

**Helpline:** Freephone 116 123

**Website:** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Other organisations who can help if you are experiencing thoughts of self-harm include:

**Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)** (for men)

Helpline: 0800 58 58 58

**Papyrus** (for people under 35)

Helpline: 0800 068 41 41

**Childline** (for those under 19)

Helpline: 0800 1111

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## **Further information**

**Isotretinoin patient guide, British Association of Dermatologists** -

This patient guide has been written to help you understand more about isotretinoin. It tells you what it is, how it works, how it is used and where you can find out more about it.

**Acne Support** – This platform is run by the British Association of Dermatologists and aims to offer expert, impartial advice on acne.

**Isotretinoin (Roaccutane): introduction of new safety measures, including additional oversight of the initiation of treatment for patients under 18 years of age** – Guidance from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency from 31 October 2023

**Isotretinoin guide for young people, Medicines for Children** - This guide on isotretinoin is written specifically for children and young people.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has information resources on different mental illnesses and treatments:

**Depression in adults**

**Self-harm**

**Antidepressants**

**Psychotherapies**

**Information for young people**

**Self-harm in young people**

**When bad things happen**

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## **Credits**

This information was produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Public Engagement Editorial Board (PEEB). It reflects the best available evidence at the time of writing.

This information is adapted from a resource written by Dr Harsha Makena and Dr Jim Bolton from the St Helier Hospital Liaison Psychiatry Service, with support from the Department of Dermatology.

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Full references available on request.

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