

AMERICAN ACCUTANE

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If you ever find yourself needing information about Accutane, you're in luck. The internet is chock full of personal Accutane testimonies in which the user explains the main side effects they experienced while on the drug. I've struggled with acne all of my life, but throughout high school, it proved to be manageable enough thanks to powerful, acne-fighting products you can find at the drugstore. It wasn't until the summer of 2020 that adult acne had its way with me. I have cystic pimples from ear to ear. My skin's always been a bit sensitive, but there's something about wearing a tight-fitting, cloth mask every time I step out of my house that screams skin irritation. The mask gets damp with my breath, it hugs the sides of my face, and when I get home, I'm tempted to run ice cubes over my jaw for any sense of relief from the burning sensation I'm left with. After about 4 months of staying home to avoid wearing a mask (besides weekly grocery store trips) I'd tried every product from my high school days, and when nothing worked, I booked an appointment with my dermatologist.

He prescribed an antibiotic while simultaneously stating that he didn't have high hopes for the results due to the severity of the stuff living on my face. I had had this thought myself before stepping foot in his office. He sent me on my way to my pharmacy and said he'd see me back in two months and that if I hadn't begun to see positive results by then, we'd begin the Accutane process. Immediately, I was nervous and excited. I also realized that he didn't say we could discuss the Accutane process, nor did he ask me if I had any questions following our brief meeting. But the possibility of eliminating my acne is like ecstasy; I've convinced myself that I will not be happy until I do, and I know I will not enjoy looking in the mirror until then. But Accutane is a loud word that can cause some anxiety; most are aware of the connotations that surround the drug. I vaguely remember my eldest brother being prescribed it for his acne, and I remember that he couldn't spend five minutes in the sun without frying. There must be additional reasons for the drug's stigma. When my doctor doesn't have high hopes, I assume that means I shouldn't either, so I began researching the drug to decide if it was something I'd be willing to ingest.

Besides the countless YouTube testimonies, there are plenty of well researched articles from medical professionals describing the adverse effects of isotretinoin. From the scholarly side of the internet, I learned that isotretinoin, more commonly known by its brand name Accutane, has been prescribed to over 12 million people worldwide. The drug is praised in the field of dermatology for its efficacy; nothing has come close to achieving the same standard as isotretinoin because of the drug's ability to produce "long-term remission and/or significant improvement in many patients."<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is simultaneously condemned for its side effects. There's a good chance you know someone who has taken the drug, probably during their teenage years due to experiencing severe cystic acne. Maybe you're familiar with the cracked, brutally dry lips people often sport while on the drug. Maybe you've noticed a stranger whose face resembled a tomato, or you yourself have experienced the painful, peeling, and shedding of your skin thanks to this chemical. But the drug's side-effects stretch farther than removing oils from the body.

That is, however, the drug's main goal: to reduce sebum production. Sebum is the waxy oil that is produced by our body's sebaceous glands to protect us from water loss (did I mention dehydration is a common side effect of Accutane?) Our body's exterior is coated in these glands; Healthline states that your face may have up to 900 of these glands per square centimeter of skin.<sup>2</sup> It's no surprise that skin texture can change as a result of taking this drug, but oils play other vital roles in our bodies, such as lubricating our joints so they are functionally prepared to keep us moving. People can sometimes experience joint pain while on the drug, preventing them from exercising as often as they normally would.

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<sup>1</sup> Layton, Alison. "The Use of Isotretinoin in Acne." *Dermato-endocrinology*. Landes Bioscience, May 2009. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2835909/>

<sup>2</sup> Pedroja, Cammy. "What Is Sebum?" *Healthline*. Healthline Media, November 26, 2018. <https://www.healthline.com/health/beauty-skin-care/sebum>.

Some other notable side effects include mucositis, the painful inflammation and ulceration of the mucous membranes lining the digestive tract. Most common in chemotherapy and radiotherapy patients, isotretinoin users have a 40% chance of experiencing this side effect.<sup>3</sup> Women have a 50% chance of suffering from vestibulitis, characterized as a stinging or burning-like pain of the outermost part of the vagina.

All of this information definitely gave me something to think about. I visited my dermatologist in mid-September, meaning I've been taking my prescribed antibiotic for two months now. He was right, the results were less than promising; I've seen no changes in my skin. Feeling like I'd be willing to brace some dryness for a chance at a picture-perfect complexion, I continued to educate myself on this drug and decided to entertain some personal journeys. There's something about hearing real people's experiences that can make things seem less frightening.

I then began watching YouTube videos of young women discussing their personal Accutane stories. Most of the thumbnails for the videos showed drastic changes; girls with red bumps covering their faces made up the left half of the thumbnail while the same girl with perfect skin occupied the right half. I was glad to see so many successful results; I was sure I'd stumble upon a few horror stories, but things remained positive. Most of the videos began with the Accutane user describing the acne they experienced pre-isotretinoin. The story is usually the same: terrible, resilient acne. Side effects include social anxiety; lack of motivation and self-confidence; sometimes even isolation and depression.

Some of the women elaborated on what is commonly referred to as the "Accutane process." They made sure their audience knew that receiving their prescription was not a one-and-done ordeal. Many described similar scenarios, beginning a month before they could be

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<sup>3</sup> Layton.

prescribed the drug. To make sure their bodies were healthy enough to go on the medication, their blood needed to be analyzed to test their liver and their cholesterol, two things that can be affected by isotretinoin. Their urine was also tested to determine if they were pregnant or not. The girls then waited one month to revisit their dermatologists so they could go over lab results and receive another pregnancy test. Then, and only then, with sufficient lab results and two negative pregnancy tests (for females), could they be prescribed the medication. The process does not end there. The process continues for the entirety of the time that a person is on the drug; patients are required to do blood work and submit a negative pregnancy test for their next month's supply of isotretinoin to be in their hands.

The negative pregnancy tests lead us into another side effect of the drug, considerably the most serious out of all possible isotretinoin side effects. Isotretinoin was found to be a teratogenic drug, meaning that it can disturb the development of an embryo or fetus. Pertaining to pregnancy and isotretinoin, "fifty percent of pregnancies spontaneously abort, and of the remainder about half of the infants are born with cardiovascular or skeletal deformities."<sup>4</sup> No wonder the government implemented the iPledge program with such intensity.

Video after video, I noticed people skipping over this factor of the Accutane process; only a few mentioned that they were required to perform online quizzes every month to receive their prescriptions. Then I came across a YouTube video released by the creator Arden Rose on May 3, 2019 titled "How I went from the WORST ACNE to the BEST skin!" Accutane was listed in the description, so I right when assuming that the video was another documentation of a personal Accutane experience. She, like the creator of every other video I had watched previously on the subject, was speaking in an American accent. But she criticized America for its extensive regulation of the drug.

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<sup>4</sup> Layton.

“God bless all my ladies in the US that have taken Accutane that have had to go through multiple pregnancy tests; the iPledge system can suck my butthole!” she said around 6:50. She went as far as calling the program “pointless and sexist.” A comment on her video held 358 likes and read “I’m one month away from finishing Accutane over here and if I have to take one... more... god forsaken quiz... about CONDOMS. This drug is better regulated than guns in our country and it’s STUPID.”

I like to consider myself an intersectional feminist, so the thought of a regulation in the United States being deemed “sexist” was not a surprise to me. But why did Rose think this way? After sifting through the other videos on her channel, I found out that her boyfriend lived in the UK and that she was staying with him for a while when she finally decided that Accutane was right for her. She said she felt comfortable with her physician in the UK; she felt that she was able to better communicate with healthcare providers across the pond. Halfway through her “process,” she moved back home to the States with a month’s supply of isotretinoin. During that month, she visited a dermatologist so she could continue her process, but she soon realized how the drug was more heavily regulated here than in the UK.

Things didn’t start off well; Arden didn’t have health insurance, so she ended up paying \$1500 total for doctor’s visits, lab work, and a one month’s supply of the prescription versus the £500 she paid for a five month’s supply of the drug while in the UK. She was required to enroll in the iPledge program, an online website that tracks all users of isotretinoin in the States. The program issues monthly quizzes that are mandatory for users on the subject matters of the teratogenic properties of the drug and on different birth control methods. Apparently, signing a sheet of paper that says “I will use two forms of birth control every time” is not enough. The site also keeps track of the negative pregnancy tests taken by female users. Without the input of a negative test every month, the prescription cannot be refilled.

Arden acknowledged that she understood why the program was necessary, the reason she highlighted being liability, not concern for fetuses. She also acknowledged that every

country has a different system for allotting isotretinoin to its users. I visited the iPledge website and headed to the “About iPledge” tab to see what I could find out about their practices in particular. “The iPledge Program requires registration of all wholesalers distributing isotretinoin, all healthcare professionals prescribing isotretinoin, all pharmacies dispensing isotretinoin, and **all male and female** patients prescribed isotretinoin.”<sup>5</sup>

If men and women both had to register for the program, I was curious why Arden had called the program “sexist.” I was surprised to see that men had to register for the program in the first place. Wikipedia informed me that the system is more lenient for males, as they do not have to take pregnancy tests or comprehension tests on a monthly basis as females do. Males have a window of 30 days from the date of their doctors visit to pick up their prescription, whereas females have seven days.<sup>6</sup>

iPledge was implemented in 2006 as the latest government strategy to help prevent teratogenicity in isotretinoin users. Since then, it’s been seen as controversial from many angles. One academic article reads, “The registry has not been demonstrated to decrease rates of pregnancy among patients taking isotretinoin as compared to proceeding regulatory systems.”<sup>7</sup> Beyond that, the program has little regard for women who have sex with other women or for transgender males; there is no registration option for their gender or sexual identity nor their pregnancy potential.

While the vitamin A derivative isotretinoin has been found to have many potential side effects, one that seems to be overlooked is the drugs ability to cause confusion. My

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<sup>5</sup> “About iPledge.” iPledgeProgram.com. Accessed November 2, 2020.  
<https://www.ipledgeprogram.com/iPledgeUI/aboutProgram.u>.

<sup>6</sup> “IPLLEDGE Program.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, October 31, 2020.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IPLLEDGE\\_program](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IPLLEDGE_program).

dermatologist was in the room with me for no more than five minutes, and on my next visit, I don't expect to receive any more time from him. Having made up my own mind, I'm willing to succumb to the monthly quizzes and pregnancy tests and some dry skin if my liver and cholesterol are up for it. I am in no position to make substantial changes to a system already put in place. But when I do go back to my dermatologist, and he sends me for my blood work, and I sign up for an iPledge account, and I finally receive my prescription, I'll know how much harder it was for me to clear my skin than it was for my neighbor to buy a pistol.